

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
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Sylphy

A soldier formerly known as the Raging Champion. She boasts extraordinary battle prowess, but she's still a child on the inside.

[WEAPON] ▼

Demise-Argis

One of the three most powerful Holy Swords. Also known as the Noble Treasure of Annihilation, it can release magical energy into the space around it with one swing, fatally poisoning all living organisms in its vicinity.

The Greatest
Demon
Lord
IS REBORN
AS A
TYPICAL
NOBODY
2 The Raging
Champion



“Wh-
what
do you
think?
Do I
look
okay?”

Ireena

An elven girl with an unwavering sense of justice (who can be a sore loser at times). Along with Ard, she's wrangled into watching over recent transfer student Sylphy as an older-sister figure.

“Allow us to
indulge you
with our
hospitality!”

“I'll roll
up my
sleeves
and
then
some!”

Ginny

A succubus who worships Ard. Armed with a plan to pull off a steamy maid café at the school festival, she attempts to have all the girls in class...seduce him?!

A character with spiky white hair and a golden, flame-like mask covering the right side of their face. They are wearing a dark blue or black outfit with intricate silver or white armor details. They are holding a large, broadsword with a golden hilt and a wide, silver blade. The background is a vibrant mix of blue, purple, and pink, suggesting a sunset or sunrise sky. The overall style is anime-inspired with detailed shading and bright colors.

**“...How dare you
hurt Sylphy.”**

And all at once, a
shimmering torrent blasted
out of the golden blade.

Ard

The ex-Demon Lord,
who used to be the
most powerful being
in existence. Reborn
as an average
villager, he's set on
enjoying the school
festival when a
nuisance appears...

The Greatest
Demon
Lord **IS
REBORN
AS A**
TYPICAL
NOBODY

**The Raging
Champion**

2

Myojin Katou
Illustration by **Sao Mizuno**

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ON**
NEW YORK

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The Greatest Demon Lord Is Reborn as a Typical Nobody, Vol. 2

Myojin Katou

Translation by Jessica Lange

Cover art by Sao Mizuno

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CHAPTER 22

The Ex–Demon Lord Reunited with More Trouble

The southernmost tip of the Laville Empire of Sorcery was known as the Last Code and housed a few remote regions. The public knew about these areas, using them as tourist attractions...well, all except for one place.

The Phantom Forest.

Step too close and you'll get swallowed whole by the forest. Feared by all, it was the most isolated of places. According to legend, its center housed the ancient ruins of an expansive dungeon, eagerly awaiting adventurers to explore its caves. And yet, this purpose had gone unserved for thousands of years. In fact, everyone had already forgotten about the dungeon in the Phantom Forest.

"Whew! Yummers! The fresh air of the outdoors! As refreshing as ever!"

A young girl stepping out of the long-forgotten dungeon? More like a walking enigma.

She was from the human species—age fifteen. Well, with her baby face and body type, she could easily appear three years younger. Her resolute expression hinted at her unruly spirit... She was as stubborn as a mule, to the point that even *he* had trouble handling her.

"Ah. Can't wait to get to town and take a nice, warm bath. I spent way too much time holed up down there," she reflected, taking her red hair into her hands and gazing down at its long strands before inspecting her whole body.

It wasn't just her hair. Her crimson leather armor was covered in as much grime as one might expect in her situation.

"I knew spending *three years* down there was overkill. But now..." she trailed off. With a look of extreme confidence, she thrust her right palm high toward the heavens. "Demise-Argis!"

The space around her began to rumble...and thunder clapped as a large sword materialized in her hand.

“I’m getting good at handling this guy!” She gazed at it lovingly.

It wasn’t any ordinary sword. From the giant golden blade emanated a ghastly aura that overwhelmed all who dared look upon it.

Its name was Demise-Argis, one of the three great Holy Swords in the world.

Though it appeared too large and hefty for her small frame, she swung it once through the air and then rested it on her shoulder with an ease unbefitting of her stature.

“This should be enough to win against that Varvatos—who got all cocky after getting called the Demon Lord! A big idiot that I can now beat into a pulp!” Her face was overflowing with excitement and delight. “Thanks to this, he’ll never hurt anyone again. I’m here to protect everybody.”

She scrunched her face for a moment, but optimism quickly washed away this tragic expression. Her stomach growled with the fervor of a grand chorus.

“Plus, I’m starving. I’m going full throttle!” she boomed in good spirits, setting off at top speed.

The Phantom Forest bared its fangs toward her every step of the way, but it was all for naught.

“Yeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeah!” She plowed through pouncing monsters and illusionary tricks of the forest—charging head-on like the poster child for meatheads.

The one mowing down this precious forest of antiquity, destroying all in her path, was Sylphy Marheaven. Her other moniker was the Raging Champion, as a principal soldier in the force once led by Lydia the Champion.

In a mad dash, she made a beeline through the forest, blasting through plains at a fearsome speed that left passing caravans stupefied in the dust. And with this gale, she managed to sweep two wigs right off the heads of other travelers.

“Wh-what in the world...?!” she exclaimed, bewildered, upon her arrival. Her destination had been a small village, but...what she found in its place was a

large metropolis.

The sun streamed down on the main avenue where all sorts of species hustled down to create a lively scene. But this was worlds apart from the place that she had bid farewell to *many years ago* .

“Is it normal to make this much progress over the span of a few years? Man, the villagers got to work,” Sylphy concluded, letting sweat trickle down her pale skin.

“Ha-ha-ha. You jump to the wildest conclusions. It’s a relief to see you haven’t changed,” chirped a cheerful voice next to Sylphy. Its sonorous tone could have belonged to either a man or a woman.

She turned her attention to the side to find someone strange: shorter than average for a man, taller than average for a woman, a slim build concealed by a tailcoat of sorts. Their silky hair was a glossy black, tumbling all the way down to their knees.

Well, there was nothing strange about these details—other than the unique mask that cemented her first impression of them.

In other words, they were an eccentric with a few screws loose.

And yet, no passersby seemed to give this person a second glance—which was a feeling that Sylphy shared, too, inexplicably. It was as if her consciousness was being controlled...

“Anyway. Allow me to applaud you for years of dedicated training. I mean, even I would not have expected you to spend *thousands of years* working on your craft.”

“Huh?”

She’d been curious about this masked figure, but this had her full attention. “Th-thousands of years? Wh-what do you mean?”

“Well, well, well. I’d assumed you went to the Phantom Forest aware of this. The dungeon has a high concentration of mana, yielding high-level monsters and establishing it as an ideal location to train for combat... Except the flow of time is different from the outside world. Are you telling me you locked yourself

away without this knowledge?”

“What? N-no, uh... O-of course not! I totally knew all along. Ah! Wow! Nothing beats the taste of fresh air after thousands of yeeeeeeeeeeeeears!”

It was complete nonsense, but the masked figure stifled their laughter and pressed no further. Sylphy had a few questions of her own. *I swear we've met somewhere before...like we were close in the past...*

There was something off about them that she just couldn't put her finger on. But she also wasn't in a mood to dig further. For some reason. She wasn't sure why.

In any case, there was something more important.

“If thousands of years have passed...the world has changed a bunch, right?”

“Aye. It has become dull.”

“...Is Varvatos the Stupid Idiot alive?”

It felt as if the face behind the mask had twisted into a smile. “No. He already passed away,” they announced, delivering a verbal blow.

“D-dead?! The Demon Lord?!”

“I can understand your surprise. It was an unpredictable series of events. Backed into a corner, His Majesty took his own life with a strike of his sword... Though he is no more, his legacy lives on. Oh, it's wonderful...,” they purred in adoration.

Sylphy tried to get more details. “Wh-what happened while I was gone...?!”

With grandiose gestures, the masked figure began to spin their tale. “A rampage by the man with unfathomable strength, who earned his name as the Demon Lord. One day, he went off the deep end. I mean, one of my personal creeds is that nothing is more temporary than the human heart. I guess I was right. His Majesty went wild, imposing a reign of terror, following the footsteps of those Outer Ones once eliminated by your kind...known in this era as the Evil Gods.”

They spun around as if dancing, continuing on like a song. “Why did it happen? No one can say. Only he knows. That said, three things are evident:

that he attempted to become one of the Evil Gods; that he'd been driven to take his own life when the rebellion ensued; and that the Demon Lord was reborn in this modern era, now attempting to throw the world back into madness."

All this time, Sylphy stood frozen in place with her eyes peeled wide.

The masked figure blabbed on and on and on. "I've already assessed potential bodies for his reincarnation. My best lead is Ard Meteor. My basis for this is simple—there was an incident two weeks ago concerning demons attacking the royal capital and a girl abducted by the legendary White Dragon. Ard Meteor was able to solve both in one go, cleaning up the hordes of demons and overthrowing the White Dragon, Elzard, who'd stooped down to aiding them. He saved the capital and the beautiful girl, and he rose up as a hero." They laughed through their nose.

"It's like a boring performance chock-full of clichés. Pretend to be virtuous, build up a heroic ballad, try to make the world his own. Just as he tried to do in his last life." The figure stared long and hard at Sylphy before questioning her in a grave tone. "Raging Champion. Will you allow this to pass? The tyrannical Demon Lord, reborn; the shrill screams of innocent townspeople—all to culminate in a hellish fight. At this rate, the world will be led into chaos once again! By that man! By the Demon Lord Varvatos, now known as Ard Meteor!"

"Th-that's...!"

"In all honesty, you're our only hope! Only you can stop this walking nightmare! Please! Raging Champion! It's time for you to unleash your power! Exert to your heart's content the strength you have gained from all your training! Crush the ambitions of the repulsive Demon Lord!"

"I—!" Sylphy shouted, facing the masked silhouette. Her flaming hair bristled. She couldn't believe everything she was hearing. "I—!" she started again. "Of course I'll do it! That's a given! I'm gonna take down the Demon Lord!"

She was honest to a fault. She believed every last word.

"Damn him! I knew he was off his rocker! I've always thought he was trouble, but no one listened to me...! Even my sister Lydie sided with him! There's no doubt *it* happened because he brainwashed her!" With her fists clenched and

rage unchecked, Sylphy gave the masked person a piercing look. “Where?! Where’s that numbskull now?! Where’d he go?!”

“The royal capital, Dycaeus. He’s enrolled in the Laville National Academy of Magic at the heart of the city. If you continue south from here, you should reach it. At your speed, it shouldn’t take more than two days.”

“The Academy of Magic in Dycaeus! All riiiiiiiiiiiiight! Just you wait, Demon Lord!” Sylphy bellowed before kicking off from the ground with full power, cracking the paved road under her feet—a natural disaster in human form.

The masked figure watched her silhouette become smaller and smaller in the distance. “And the curtain rises on his story with the jester at center stage. Heh-heh... Dance, Sylphy Marheaven, dance. Accomplish your goal and keep me entertained,” they spoke with delight, with joy, with nostalgia.

Their entire body trembled before dissolving—as if a shadow melting into the light.



I’ve felt as though I’ve been repeating the same line over and over again as of late. I’ve become an eternal metronome, ticking to a melody I cannot stop, even if I wanted it to end. It’s been enmeshed in my identity as Ard Meteor, something I cannot shake. And it goes without saying that I would be fated to say this line again.

“Why did things turn out this way?”

I was faced with an unexpected situation, not one I wished for in the slightest.

“W-wow...! I’d expect no less from Ard Meteor the Dragon Slayer...!”

“T-taking out Mr. Halkein in one hit!”

My classmates sang my praises as a bald man was passed out and foaming at the mouth in front of us.

“Heh-heh-heh! We’re talking about my Ard, so it’s no biggie, obviously!” Ireena puffed out her chest proudly with a triumphant expression—which was so cute.

“He’s not *your* Ard, Miss Ireena!” Ginny snapped with an annoyed look. The

wings on her head twitched.

“Wow, wow, wow. Just incredible. Halkein was one of my best pupils, but to see him knocked out in one go? Reminds me of my idiotic brother. Right, Aaaaard?” cooed Olivia, my honorary sister in my past life, with a full-blown, too bright, most awful smile.

Why did things turn out this way? Let’s rewind a few minutes.

In this life, I’m attending the Laville National Academy of Magic, and it has periodic exams, just like any other school. Each season brought on a whole new slew of written and practical tests. We’d taken the written portion the day before, and we were supposed to have the practical today.

Me? I was planning on passing with—and I cannot emphasize this enough—*normal* grades. Nothing that might make me stick out...but with my involvement in solving the recent case with the demons and Elzard the White Dragon, well, I’ve been the center of unwanted attention.

The students who were commoners had good intentions. But the aristocrats? Not so much. As for the instructors, they were a mixed bag—treating me with either respect or hostility. Among them, the bald instructor Halkein seemed to think of me as the impertinent student who’d won Olivia’s favor.

“Ard Meteor. For your practical exam...for this mock battle, I will be your opponent.”

This man may not have had a single hair on his head, but he was a tough fighter rumored to have a fighting prowess that was first-rate even in the academy. They said he’d even served among the sorcerers under the queen’s direct command. The showdown between this beast of a teacher and me would draw a large crowd... Well, this situation was all fine and well up until this point.

Halkein was strong. It wouldn’t have been strange at all if I’d lost.

Which is why I decided to put on a bit of an act.

To keep Olivia from finding me out, I’d make it a close contest and lose at the end by a margin. Then, her standards for me would lower, like, “Huh. I guess that’s all Ard’s got.”

I'd re-lower the bar for me after it'd been shot up way too high following the recent incident and go back to looking like your average villager. I was ready to try my best to make it a close call, making the first move and allowing him to cancel out my magic. And I'd toss in a few pretend moves to give credence to my defeat.

...That had been the plan anyway.

"Here I come, Ard Mete—"

I had cast *Flare* at 20 percent power, a low-level fire magic, easy enough for Halkein to defend.

As the dust enveloped us, he'd say *Pretty cocky*. And as he started to feel all good about himself, I'd answer him with a *Tch* and pretend to feel the pressure.

...Well, that was the series of events I'd been hoping for.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah ?!" Halkein was unable to shield himself against my fireball and was flung into the distance with extra dramatic flair.

...*What the hell are you doing?* To be unable to defend himself? Give me a break. I could have never predicted that.

"Y-you're kidding, right...?! Even Mr. Halkein...?!"

"What a super-strength *Mega Flare* ...!"

So that's how things turned out.

Besides, it wasn't a *Mega Flare* . It was a regular *Flare* .

...Anyway.

"Well, I guess I've gotta try harder, too! I'll be just like my Ard and knock everyone's socks off!"

"Enough already! You know what you're trying to do! Are you trying to pick a fight with me, Miss Ireena?!"

"By the way, Ard, why don't you stop by my place tonight? I promise to show you a great time," added Olivia.

I'll say it again: Why did things turn out this way?

After surviving a nerve-racking morning and a chaotic afternoon, I'd managed to make it through the school day—to peace. Under the orange sky, I made my way back to the dorm.

“Wow, Ard! I'm amazed you scored one hundred and twenty out of one hundred percent in every subject!” Ginny slipped her arm into mine, pushing her big boobs against me as she flashed me a captivating smile, and if that wasn't enough, her large breasts pressed up against me. She was the only one around.

Ireena would have normally accompanied us, too, which meant I would have a beautiful girl hanging on each arm as I headed back for the day. But at the practical exams, my Ireena had gone all out—and destroyed half the school. This had earned her a good scolding from Olivia, and she was still at school cleaning up the mess.

As her friend and low-key guardian...this was a big concern for me. Should I really allow myself to do nothing and head home without her? I could still head back...

“Ard. Thinking of Miss Ireena, I take it?” Ginny pouted, mood soured.

“Yes. She is being targeted, after all. Which makes me worried.”

“...As her friend?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Hmm...” Her face didn't seem too convinced. Ginny continued, expression unchanging. “I'm sure it'll be fine. Lady Olivia is with her.”

“Well, yes, that's true.”

“...I won't ask you to stop thinking of other girls when you are with me, but Miss Ireena is another matter,” she murmured in a somewhat quiet voice.

I didn't really get it, but I had a feeling continuing this discussion would not end well. Her mood would only worsen. I decided to nip it in the bud by switching topics.

“Oh, that's right, Ginny. Your homemade lunch was a smashing success today.”

“What?! R-really?”

“Yes. Everything was delicious. In fact, it was so tasty that it almost made me want to ask to eat it every day.”

“Please leave it to me! It’s no trouble at all! I’ll make you one! Every! Day!” Her cheeks softened as she broke into a smile, abandoning her previous mood. The wings on her head flitted.

I knew it. She was the cutest when she smiled. Maybe I’d cook with her later today now that school was over. I’d mastered the art of ancient cuisine, but there was still so much more to learn in other areas. *And if Ireena joins in... Now I’m kind of looking forward to it.*

I wished time would continue forever like this. Nuisance-free. I could spend time together with my friends Ireena and Ginny in peace and tranquility—

“Ard Meeeeeeeeteor! Ard Meteor, where are youuuuuuu?!”

Peace. And. Tranquility.

“Come oooooout! You cooooooward! Stop sneaking around, you wiiiiiiiiiiiiiiimp!” someone blared from the school gate, which instantly spiraled me into a depression.

I could have sworn I’d heard that voice somewhere before. It sounded like someone I had no desire to meet for...reasons.

I glanced toward the gate. Sure enough, I saw one of the fools who’d given me a headache in my past life standing right there with a demonic expression.

Sylphy Marheaven.

What was she doing here? Not to mention, where had she been wandering around this entire time?

Last I saw her, she’d announced something totally bonkers: *“I’m gonna quit the military until I can take you down!”* then up and disappeared, never to return. I’d figured she died somewhere on the side of the road, but apparently, she was alive and well.

Make no mistake, this girl was annoyance personified. I wanted absolutely nothing to do with her and intended to quickly head home—

That had been the plan.

“You! Over there! Where’s Ard Meteor?!”

I’d made eye contact, and now she was heading right for me.

Ginny must have thought Sylphy was irritating as hell. “Who are you? And what kind of business do you have with Ard?”

“Duh! I obviously came here to beat the living crap out of him!”

“I’m sorry, what? That’s impossible. Right, Ar—?”

As Ginny turned and called my name, I hurriedly clasped my hand over her mouth.

Thank goodness. Sylphy hadn’t seemed to notice that I’m Ard Meteor. That was Sylphy for you. Imperceptive as always. Just like back in the old days, the lights were on, but no one was home.

“I-if you’re looking for Ard, I think he’s at school. He’s famous around these parts, and he’s always kept late by his peers. My guess is that he’s chatting with his friends.”

“Inside the school? Got it! Okaaaaay! Just you wait, Ard Meteor!” she shrieked, stupidly dashing away at stupid hyper-speed like a dumb boar.

Most importantly, it looked like she’d bought the story.

“Well, then. Shall we go, Ginny?”

“C-can we really just leave her be?”

“...Ginny. We all have things we’d prefer not to do.” I set off once again.

“Ard Meteooooooooooooor! Time for baaaaaattle!”

“Eeeeeek?! Th-that’s not meee!”

“No use aaaaaaarguiing!”

“S-Sylphy?! Is that you?! W-wait! stop! If you release a huge spell here—”

BOOOOOOOM!

A terrible thundering noise erupted from behind me, but I ignored it.

Sorry, Olivia. I'm leaving the numbskull to you—like in our last lives. I'm begging you to handle her in a way that's convenient for me... Take that lost cause someplace else. Seriously. Please.

...The next day, I was gently roused awake by the warm sunshine washing over me, as always. I prayed this day would restore a state of stability and headed off to school.

...But as I'd expected, the greater outside forces seemed to have a series of trials and tribulations in store for me. I entered the classroom and sat at my desk for some time before Olivia entered. Exhaustion and irritation marked her stunning face.

"Unfortunately...absolutely unfortunately, I regret to inform you that we have a transfer student. Come in." She jerked her hand, commanding the new student to enter.

The door burst open.

And who could it be?

"Aaaaaard! Meeeteeoooooor! Wheeeeeeeere aaaaare you?!"

The unmistakable idiot. Sylphy Marheaven.

Okay.

We're early in the day, but let's go ahead and say it. All together now.

Ready?

WHYYYYYYYY IS THIIIIIIIIIS HAPPENIIIIIIIIIIING?!

CHAPTER 23

The Ex–Demon Lord Dealing with a Fool

With the podium in front of her, Sylphy surveyed the rowdy classroom with eyes that were strangely bloodshot—with enough heat to make you wonder if she were out to avenge a family member.

“...Hey, Stupid, er, I mean, *Sylphy* . Hurry up and introduce yourself. Or I’ll make you go through the same thing as last night,” Olivia barked. Paired with her piercing glare, it was enough to make Sylphy jolt.

I wasn’t clear about what happened yesterday, but she must have gotten her ass handed to her. Though she seemed scared shitless, Sylphy put on a composed air and flipped her red hair with a dramatic *whoosh* .

“I’m Sylphy Marheaven! I’m a little nervous because it’s my first time at school! But it’s nice to meet you!”

Nervous? You? How?

“Um... Sylphy Marheaven...?”

“Isn’t that the same name as the Raging Champion?”

“Didn’t she go MIA fighting the Evil Gods?”

“A transfer student in the middle of the term...with crimson hair...and the same name... N-no... It can’t be...!”

“Oh, come on, dude. That’s impossible. It’s just a coincidence. Plus, the OG Sylphy was a bombshell with a huge rack, right?”

“Well, it depends on the book you’re basing it on... But this runt? You’re right. No chance.”

...Historical accounts aren’t always accurate as they get passed down to future generations. This includes descriptions of a hero’s personality, too.

In the modern world, Sylphy is regarded as a reserved goddess type who transforms into a battle maiden in times of war...which is totally different from her true self. Who's to blame? Take me to the person who came up with this crap.

There wasn't an ounce of reservation in her. Her brains were basically just balanced on her head like an accessory.

In other words, Sylphy Marheaven held the record for the World's Biggest Blockhead. And Soup for Brains was glaring about the classroom once again.

"I'm done with my intro! Okay, Olivia! Bring out Ard!"

All eyes immediately fell on me. Even Sylphy and her pea brain could tell from their reaction I was Ard...

"You mean—— you're Ard?! Th-the guy from yesterday?! You tricked meeeeeeeeeeeeeee?!" In a rage, she made a beeline for me—the very definition of a mad dash.

She came to a screeching halt and caught enough air to flip up her skirt, exposing her pure-white panties. Not that she cared. Neither did I.

Her face flushed bright red with rage, and she yanked me by my collar. "A trick by the Demon Lord! As despicable as ever!"

...Hey. What's Birdbrain tossing me into?

"P-please, wait. Hold on. What do you mean by Demon Lord?"

"Don't play dumb! I know all about you: You're the reincarnation of the Demon Lord Varvatos!"

...What the hell is this girl trying to do to me?

I'd been trying my damndest to keep the truth from getting out, and now she'd barged in, spilling the beans...! I could feel my anger welling up at the moron in front of me.

If this had been in our past lives, I would have screamed *What do you think you're talking about, you dipshit?!* and given her a taste of my fists...but if I did that now, it'd basically confirm her suspicions. I would bear it. I would endure.

Because no one was gonna believe her nonsense. No one would ever believe I was the Demon Lord—

“Ard is his reincarnation...?! I guess I could see that...!”

What?

“If I remember correctly, the Demon Lord left behind a message before he passed on: *‘Upon the passing of many eons, I shall return when Daemons once again rise to smite the Earth.’*”

What? I didn’t say that. None of that rings a bell.

The following is the exact phrase that I’d left behind: *I’m gonna die because I’m so sad. Assassination? More like asSADination. Ha-ha-ha.* I thought it was ingenious. What do you think?

...Anyway.

“Ard? The Demon Lord? I never would have guessed! But now that you mention it, it falls right in place! Oh, Ard, as expected of you! I’m falling in love all over again!”

Really, Ginny? As expected of me? How does that make any logical sense to you?

Starting with Ginny, around half the students in the class seemed to believe I was the reincarnated Demon Lord.

“Sylphy, you said you know all about him. Give us the details.” My nosy big sister was bursting with curiosity.

But Sylphy was so cross that she paid no attention to Olivia and stared me down in the worst sort of way. “Let’s duel! You and me in a face-off! I’m gonna totally destroy you! Get ready!” she blared, pointing at me sharply.

Let’s see. What do I do?

Well, first things first, I didn’t have the slightest intention of going up against her. She was one of the few I’d get serious fighting against; there was no question I’d end up blowing my cover. And there was no way I could let Olivia figure out I’m the Demon Lord.

I had to somehow make this conversation work in my favor...! I pondered.

“Hey, you! You’ve been going around saying whatever you want, and it’s making me mad!” A chair clattered as a girl of ephemeral beauty jumped to her feet, her silvery hair bristling like a menacing puppy. My Ireena. She narrowed her eyes as though she’d reached the end of her patience. I could almost see the flames roaring behind her. She looked hyper-dignified.

“I’ll fight you in Ard’s place!” She jabbed her finger in Sylphy’s direction, who took those fighting words to dish them right back...

Or not. On the contrary, her eyes widened in surprise.

...Oh, right. She could probably see shadows of Lydia in Ireena, too. Fair enough. I’d been surprised when I first met her.

...To Sylphy, Lydia the Champion had been a mentor, a mother, a big-sister figure. With her doppelgänger in front of her, Sylphy asked, “Wh-what are you to Ard Meteor?”

“I’m his friend! His *best* friend! There’s no one closer to him! Every other friend of his is below me! That’s our relationship!”

I had no idea what she was trying to say, but it was cute. And that’s all that matters.

“I—I see... Hmm...” Sylphy bumbled with a somewhat mixed expression. All her intensity from before was gone as she stared at Ireena and fidgeted.

Ireena let out a low growl, taking this as a threat. And honestly, watching her attempt to hit Sylphy with her scariest face was *super* -adorable.

A few second later, Sylphy broke the silence. “Y-you! B-become my friend! Th-then I’ll give Ard Meteor a pass!” she blurted out, managing to muster up all her strength.

Back to my Ireena. “No way! I don’t wanna be friends with anyone who thinks Ard is an enemy!”

“Gaack?!”

With her arms crossed, Ireena scoffed and looked away with a decisive *Hmph!*

Sylphy trembled like a newborn fawn. “U-uguuuuuh...!” Her large eyes brimmed with tears before she glared at me for some inexplicable reason. “I-I’ll remember this, Ard Meteor! *Waaaaaaaaaah!* ” She sprinted off dynamically, casting her spite onto me—an innocent bystander.

“...Sylphy Marheaven, absent without leave,” Olivia announced with a sigh as she took attendance.

Holy crap, I was exhausted. And it was still morning.

A little while later, the simpleton who’d theatrically blasted through the door now came crawling back timidly. I’d hoped she would just run off into the distance, but my guess was that she had nowhere to go.

Which is why we had no choice but to start the lesson with Sylphy the Ticking Time Bomb. We changed into our comfy gym clothes and headed to the expansive athletic field.

First period was sword training with Olivia. We started with practice swings and performed a choreographed warm-up routine. This was one of the courses where I could feel at ease because there usually wasn’t anything here to heighten Olivia’s suspicions, and time passed by without a hitch.

“Yah! Yah! Yaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

But thanks to the dunderhead blasting our classmates away with her powerful swings, my safe place became an anxiety-inducing battlefield.

Why did things turn out this way?



“...Hey, Sylphy. Rein it in. We can’t continue class like this.”

“But I *am* ! Honestly! Everyone in this era is a bunch of weaklings!”

I could tell exhaustion and stress had even begun to seep through Olivia’s steely mask.

“That girl is something. Maybe she’s *the* Sylphy?”

“N-no way. Absolutely not. Sylphy is supposed to be a timid cutie patootie. That girl doesn’t even come close.”

Well, that version of Sylphy never existed in the first place.

Stupidity and barbarity in human form. That was the real Sylphy Marheaven.

With a living natural disaster tossed into our class, everything was topsy-turvy, but...it was less eventful than I’d anticipated. *I hope this would keep up and conclude without incident*, I thought.

“Okay, moving on to sparring. First up, Ard Meteor. It’ll be you”—Olivia flashed the smile of a schemer—“...versus Sylphy Marheaven.”

Well, she certainly seemed pleased to announce this crap.

“Bring it on! Out of all my skills, I’ve improved my swordplay the most in the past few years!” Sylphy burst with enthusiasm. Watching her puff out that flat chest proudly was an absolutely revolting sight.

“No, p-please wait! Lady Olivia!”

“Uh-oh, what’s this? Something wrong, Ard Meteor? Afraid to go up against me? Come to think of it, you *have* always lost your nerve when it counts most!”

Th-this damn brat...! N-no, hang in there. Don’t let her get to you.

“L-Lady Olivia. I’m sure you can see there is no need for me to spar with Sylphy. Her skill is beyond classroom instruction. Which is why—”

“Why don’t you want to go up against this kid? Is it because you’ll get all worked up? Reminds me of my stupid little brother, who was usually cool and collected but lost his mind whenever Sylphy got involved.” Olivia flashed a bright smile with an expression that revealed exactly what was on her mind.

She was seriously trying to bait me with Sylphy to get me to admit I was the Demon Lord. In that case, I wanted to spar even less. But...if I was to refuse outright, that would come with its own problems. She'd take that to mean I was declining this match *because* I feared my true identity would be revealed.

...Now that it had come to this, I didn't have much of a choice.

"Very well. I humbly accept this sparring match."

I'd give my all to ensure I lost this battle. I'd get beaten by stupid Sylphy.

...Wh-which was nerve-racking. In fact, I'd never been so anxious in my life—or my past life.

"Get her, Ard! You'll have her KO'd in three seconds flat!" Ireena cheered.

"Gweh?!" This must have gouged out Sylphy's heart because it triggered her to engage in full-on grudge mode as her eyes brimmed with tears. *"I'm gonna beat you black and bluuuuue!"*

She rushed forward violently, closing in on me almost faster than the speed of sound. The force of it blew back the hair of those standing in her vicinity—including mine. Both wooden swords clashed within moments, and a shock wave blasted out around us.

We exchanged one blow—two blows, then three in a dizzyingly aggressive performance. The air whistled as our swords came crashing down on each other, and the ground rumbled under our feet.

"I-incredible...!"

"They're seriously taking it too far...!"

Not good. If we kept going, my reputation would soar against my will. I had to hurry up and lose, but...

"What's wrong, Demon Lord?! Shaken by my new and improved sword skills?!"

I've gotta lose, I thought. However, say I did admit defeat...

Huh? You got something to say? Even though you're weaker than me? she might say.

Hey. How about making me some tea? What? You talking back? Even though you're weaker than me? I could almost hear her taunting me.

There was no question she would totally look down on me at every opportunity. If it was anybody else, I couldn't have cared less. But from this dumb? I absolutely would not be able to stand it.

I'm sure every single human alive has at least one person who drives them up the wall if they attempted to spurn them. For me? Sylphy fit that box perfectly, which was why...

"I cannot speak on your improvement—but you still have a long way to go."

Sylphy had a tick of leaning slightly to the left after going in with a thrust. It was a tiny shift but enough to dull her movements... If an attacker cut in from her right side, it would take her too long to respond. Sure, her swordplay had gotten better, but she still hadn't managed to outgrow her old habits. Which is why I could get her in the abdomen, like this. See?

"Argh?!" Sylphy yipped as she soared through the air, blasted away by my side swipe. She managed to land a dozen paces away from me.

I'd held back my strength. It shouldn't have been a big deal.

"...One point. Winner: Ard Meteor." To my surprise, there was no trace of Olivia's smile. Maybe she'd never expected me to win.

Huh. I guess winning wasn't so bad after all, if only for this outcome. If I had lost, I would imagine she would have accused me of losing on purpose and pressed me for answers.

At any rate, things had worked out well for me this time—

"I—I refuse...! I refuse to accept this! I'm strong now! Stronger than you! And way stronger than the Demon Lord!" Sylphy boomed sorely, facing me...and then shouted, *"Demise-Argis!"*

From the palm of the hand that she thrust toward the heavens flared a flash of light like a lightning bolt, followed by a thunderous echo. In the next moment, a weighty sword materialized in her hand, with a golden blade wrapped in expensive ornamentation.

The Holy Sword Demise-Argis.

One of the three great Holy Swords, it was a weapon that Lydia and I had entrusted to Sylphy in the past. And this little shit had called it to—

“I’m not done yet! This battle isn’t over!” she roared, seething, readying herself. *“Vel. Stena. Olvidis. May Interlopers Vanish with One Stroke of My Blade.”*

She released an incantation spun from the most ancient of languages and the key to unlatching the Holy Sword’s power—

“Stop! Don’t unleash that here!” Olivia screeched.

But her attempts to stop Sylphy were in vain as Sylphy came at me, hurling the Holy Sword that glided through empty space and unleashed a torrent of energy from its golden blade.

It was overwhelming, colossal, matchless. A deluge of destructive power.

“Ngh...!” Even I had no choice but to go all out and cast the special-class defense *Ultima Wall* without an invocation to envelop myself in a semitranslucent protective orb.

Seconds later, her attack collided with my barrier, pushing against my entire body with alarming force.

...That idiot had some nerve to charge up her firepower to the max and throw it at me.

I would have stood a chance at stopping her in our old world, but that was a tall order in my current form. And so, I cast another spell while still holding out against her attacks.

It was the high-level wind attack, *Giga Wind*, which generated a current of air and called upon the same destructive energy that fueled Sylphy’s attack. When it grew into a roaring magical gale, it pushed the ruinous torrent erupting out of the Holy Sword to the side—and into an abandoned old school building that blasted it into smithereens, wiping out everything in its vicinity before dwindling back to nothing.

“Wha...?! D-don’t get full of yourself just because you held off one attack—,”

Sylphy barked, ready to unleash another huge spell.

“That’s enough, Sylphy Marheaven,” Olivia snapped, already positioned with a sword pointed at the base of the girl’s throat before I could even react. Her eyes blazed with unmistakable fury. “Any more of this, and I’ll have your head.”

“Ugh...” Even Sylphy cowed under Olivia’s present state, obediently lowering her sword.

Olivia drew her blade away from her pupil’s neck. “...Take a good look around you.”

Sylphy obliged, eyes reflecting with the same scene sprawled before mine—more precisely, hordes of students crawling and writhing on the ground upon being struck down by the power of the Holy Sword.

Demise-Argis expelled a destructive energy that was like a type of poison, seeping out toxic magic with each torrent to wipe out enemies in every direction. That’s how it earned its nickname: the Noble Treasure of Annihilation.

Sylphy somehow managed to subconsciously suppress the amount of poison diffused by the weapon...but the other students had fallen ill, collapsing to the ground, except for Ireena and Ginny due to their high tolerance.

Taking in the ghastly scene, Sylphy’s face turned pale. “I—I, ah...”

“...You haven’t changed a bit. You still don’t know how to control your power—and you act like a pathetic child,” sneered Olivia in a voice seething with anger.

Olivia could be harsh like this sometimes, but there was a part of her that was fond of children, even when it appeared that she kept her students at a distance. As an educator, she took good care of them. And now those exact children had been injured before her very eyes.

Under normal circumstances, Olivia was known for snappy scoldings that cut to the chase. But not this time.

“I’ll never be able to wrap my head around why that duo entrusted this sword to the likes of you. Imagine what Lydia would think if she saw you now.”

This must have really gotten to Sylphy because she flashed an indignant look. “Y-you don’t have to go that far! Even if there had been casualties, we could have done a ceremony to revive them!” she argued.

...Geez, she hadn’t matured at all.

I guess it couldn’t be helped. My true self may be found out, but I needed to rake this hopeless fool over the coals. *As the one Lydia asked me to take care of, it’s my duty*— I was in the middle of forming my thoughts.

“You dummy! You’ve got no right to talk back!” Ireena ran over, beating me to the punch. “When you do something wrong, you say you’re sorry!”

She clubbed Sylphy right in the head.

Conk. As the sound of impact echoed through the room, Sylphy crumpled to her knees. It must have really hurt because her doe-like eyes began to fill with tears.

Ireena looked down at her. Her face housed an anger with the intensity of a blazing fire—not out of spite for the transgressor...but like a parent admonishing their child. “We get it! You’re strong! But that’s exactly why you can’t hurt others! Think long and hard about what you should be doing with your power!”

This line. This whole situation between Ireena and Sylphy. I’d seen it all before in my past life.

“You damn idiot! When you do something wrong, apologize!”

“B-but that stupid Varvatos...”

“And don’t talk back!”

Lydia had always been easy on Sylphy—except when the girl was in the wrong, when she’d be treated to a good whack upside the head and a brutal scolding. But in the end...

“You’re crazy strong. Think hard about your purpose ,” Lydia would say with a wry laugh, running her fingers through Sylphy’s hair. *“You’re helpless.”*

Right now, Ireena was doing the very same thing, which must have set off some memories for Sylphy.

“U-uuuurg... I-I’m so sowwwwy...!” she sputtered, fat tears rolling down her crumpled face.

At that, Ireena gazed at her with pure affection, continuing to stroke her head over and over.

...Sylphy Marheaven had managed to lose every last important thing in her life from a young age. Orphaned upon her parents’ murder at the hands of demons, she had joined the military after Lydia had taken her in, where she had found friends and a place to call home. But...during the war, those prized friendships fell apart. And that was why she desperately clung to her strength—to victory. It was all to avoid suffering the loss of being robbed of something again. But this stubborn will managed to guide her down the wrong path... And in the past, Lydia had been the one to stop her with a beating and also lend a hand to lead her in the right direction.

I had assumed this could never be re-created, but Ireena was spectacular. If Ireena stayed by Sylphy’s side, she would probably be okay... But was that a cop-out?

Ah yes. That’s exactly it. I’m searching for a way out.

Be that as it may, I’d have to tell Sylphy at some point.

I’d have to let her know that I was the one who took away what she’d held so dear.

CHAPTER 24

The Ex–Demon Lord’s Plans for the School Festival, Part I

Sylphy, the Walking Natural Disaster. The recent incident must have really rattled her because from second period on, she played the part of the poster child for obedience... Well, except she kept shooting daggers at me, observing my every move.

In any case, I’d managed to make it to lunchtime, navigating my way through a school day that seemed almost riddled with explosives. It was then that a woman entered the classroom, bespectacled and donning a jet-black suit—the private secretary of the headmaster.

“Mr. Ard, Miss Ireena. The headmaster has summoned you. Please, follow me.”

We had no reason to refuse. Following her orders, we made our way to his office, which showed off his expensive furnishings and where we found Olivia with a stony look and...

“Hey there, folks. Thanks for coming all this way, and sorry for calling on you during lunch,” said a friendly elderly man seated before us. He was Count Golde, the headmaster of this academy.

“Please, think nothing of it... And what can we help you with this time?”

“Ah, right. Let me cut to the chase. I’m sure you know the academy plans to host its annual school festival in a month, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Uh-huh, I can’t wait!” Ireena practically chirped, beaming, to which Golde nodded and responded with a smile of his own.

“Yes, yes. I mean, I can see how it’s a real party for the students. That said...I think you know school festivals have their own kind of educational value, too,” Golde started, clearing his throat. “Ahem. Well, all students are expected to organize something for the event on their own—from securing a location, prepping necessary materials, gathering resources, and attracting customers. We prohibit them from exerting social power from their family standing, which

means the students are left to their own devices to figure everything out. I'm sure this is a formative experience and important asset, regardless of their future occupation."

I saw no issue with his argument. In fact, he was entirely correct.

However—

"Well, there are other motivations, too." Golde scratched his head, flashing the wry smile of a brat caught making mischief. "If I'm being frank, a school festival at any magic academy is a nice way of saying 'cash cow.' Of course, it is a perfect environment to learn, but that's a front for the real reason: to rake in money. Every school knows this."

"That's impossible to avoid," I observed. "Our public school might receive aid from the government, but other schools are on their own, meaning their management is often in dire straits."

"Right. Not that we're in a situation that's much different. We're unique in that we offer a wide range of subjects, which means those costs pile up... Plus, we lost a valuable instructor just the other day."

By that, he must have meant Miss Jessica. She'd been the eldest daughter of a marquis, and she was a girl genius who'd become an instructor at the tender age of eighteen...but that was all in the past. Following the recent incident with the demons, her existence had been wiped from the face of this planet—forever.

"...How is her household faring?" I asked.

"Flipped upside down, and that's putting it lightly. Miss Jessica was supposed to be the next head of the family, and now she's suddenly gone missing."

I wished I could do something to help, since I couldn't really say I was unrelated in the matter...but I was between a rock and a hard place.

"Anyway. In order to fill the void Miss Jessica left behind, I'm hoping to rake in some cash at the school festival. I apologize for getting you wrapped up in impure adult schemes, but I would like your help."

"...It depends. What sort of plan do you have in mind?"

“Yes. Well, we’re planning two special events to draw in crowds. We’ve got the Sword King Battle Tournament, which is our annual event... But no one is forcing you to participate. I know this isn’t really your cup of tea, Mr. Ard.”

“I appreciate your understanding. I do not want to wield my power for public display—only to protect others.”

This wasn’t a lie but the absolute truth. That said, I had an additional reason for not wanting to participate—namely, that I didn’t want to arouse the suspicions of my older sister, who had been sullenly staaaaaaaring at me for a while now.

“As for our second event, I was thinkin’ we could put on a play.”

“Oh. A lovely idea. It seems they’re doing well with the common folk these days. I can see how it might draw a crowd—though it’ll depend on the actors, too.”

“Keeping up with the latest trends. I’d expect no less from you. I’d like to ask that your class put on a play, Mr. Ard and Miss Ireena. After that last incident, your names have traveled the capital far and wide. With the two of you as the stars, we could ask for no better advertisement.”

“I see. And, Ireena, how do you feel about this?”

“I really wanna try it! I’ve never acted before, but I’ve admired actresses since, like, forever! Which is why when I think about standing on that stage...it gets me super-hyped up!”

Ireena the actress, huh? Imagining it made me break into a smile. I mean, it’s Ireena for crying out loud. I could see her putting on the performance of a lifetime and taking the world by storm in the blink of an eye. She was almost too talented for her own good.

“I understand. In that case, I may not have much to offer, but I will cooperate with your plan.”

It was just a play. Even if I killed it, there was no chance it would make Olivia more suspicious of me—nor cause the public to fear me, which would drag me back to my solitary days. And think of it this way: If I could be placed in a position that was a smidgen more special than my peers, it would make it easier

for me to make friends. I'd get this situation to work for me and reap the benefits.

"Great. Feel free to write the script in whatever way you see fit. Ho-ho-ho, I can't wait for the festival." Golde chuckled, stroking his mustache.

On the other hand, Olivia sighed. "Yes. I'm looking forward to it, too... As long as no nuisances pop up."

"Nuisances?"

"Yes. Golde, might I discuss the subject at hand?"

"Of course, Lady Olivia." Golde assumed a serious expression, nodding, before opening his desk drawer to retrieve a piece of vellum paper. "Would you mind taking a look at this?"

We huddled around his desk and scrutinized the paper, which...basically said that the school festival had to be canceled, or else. In short, it was a threat.

"Well, we get this sort of thing every year. Normally, I wouldn't have even bothered to show you...if this was any usual circumstance." Golde rested his chin in his hands with a tired expression. As he had said, this was no typical letter.

The parchment was made from human skin, and carved at the very end was a peculiar crest.

According to it, the sender was—

"Are you saying this was sent by Lars al Ghoul?"

Lars al Ghoul: a name for the demon crime syndicate who revered the Evil Gods as their masters. Their plan was to revive their gods—those I had either sealed away or erased altogether in my past life—and they'd spent their days operating behind the scenes for the most part...until they made a big splash at the royal capital.

With an anxious expression, Ireena chewed on her lip as if she was reliving those memories. "...Based on the last incident, I'm their target."

"It's very likely, considering their goals," Golde replied.

The organization needed a ceremonial sacrifice to revive the Evil Gods, scouring the land for the appropriate person. And that was Ireena—the true royal heir to this nation and a descendent of the Evil Gods, which meant her spirit was akin to theirs and that she made the ideal sacrifice. With these circumstances in mind, Lars al Ghoul had been targeting her, but...

“I haven’t the faintest clue why they would involve themselves in the school festival. If their target is Ireena...I fail to see the connection between her abduction and this note.”

“Yes. Both Lady Olivia and I have been at our wit’s end over it.”

“It’s impossible to figure out their motives at this stage. Which means they could pull off something more terrible than we could ever imagine. That’s why we admitted Sylphy to the academy—to act as backup.”

...I see, so that’s what they were plotting.

“That idiot is a huge pain in the ass for any number of reasons, but she’s strong. You gotta give her that. It must be because she’s spent so long cooped up in a place with a high concentration of magic. I haven’t seen any indication that her magic has deteriorated. That’s why right now, even if you search the world over, you could say Sylphy’s battle skills are ahead of the pack.”

Sylphy, a global powerhouse, huh. It must really be the end of the world.

“And not only power...she’s fought the demons alongside us. That earns her more than a bit of trust,” Olivia added, holding her in high regard.

Ireena blinked back. “U-um, Lady Olivia... Is that brat the Raging Champion?”

“That’s right... I understand if it’s hard to believe. After all, champions are painted as larger than life. Finding out this was all a sham must come as a shock, but she’s the real deal. Better just accept it.”

Ireena assumed a dejected expression. *I get it. I’m with you on this one.*

Olivia continued. “Anyway. She may be a troublemaker, but she doesn’t have bad intentions. There’s no one clumsier, and she’s bound to mess up, but her heart’s in the right place. Looking back on it, she’s helped out plenty of times. I’m sure this time will be no different—”

This never happened. A rarity among rarities. Olivia was speaking highly of Sylphy.

In the midst of that...

“Whaaaaaaaaaat?! C’mon, say it to my face this time! I dare you!”

...an idiot shouted at a stupidly loud volume that rattled our eardrums as it echoed through the entire school.

Olivia scrunched up her face, looking like she’d sucked on a sour lemon. “..... Sorry. Scratch that. I was a fool.”

Oh, Olivia. I totally understand how you’re feeling right now.

“...May we go check on the situation?” I asked.

“S-sure. Go ahead.”

With permission, we left the room and searched for the voice, sprinting up one floor—and there she was. The situation before us looked like a real pain in the ass.

Sylphy was standing with her arms folded all imposingly, surrounded by some hooligans who were seriously jacked. In front of her were noble students, who had fallen on their butts and had goose eggs on their heads.

Sylphy had to be the bad guy here. It didn’t matter how you looked at it.

“Hold it, Sylphy! What’s going on here?!” Ireena shouted, causing Sylphy to jolt.

She looked in our direction with the expression of a frightened puppy. “Sis?! Th-this is, uh... They started it!”

Promoted to “older sister” tier, Ireena stomped over to Sylphy. “Explain yourself! If you’ve got a poor excuse for hurting people, I won’t go easy on you!”

“I-it’s not a poor excuse! Th-these guys were insulting my classmates! They were saying how commoners shouldn’t get full of themselves! And it got me riled up...!”

My classmates.

...I see. Now that I took a closer look, the tough boys accompanying her were our classmates. Trying to stick up for Sylphy, they turned to Ireena.

“Please go easy on her, boss!”

“Sylphy only clobbered them for our sakes!”

Matching their oafish looks, their voices were coarse and vulgar, as they stared the nobles down. This shook the nobles for a moment, but they soon snapped back with condescension.

“Ha! Insulted you? What are you talking about? All we said was the truth. Commoners can’t go head-to-head with the nobles. The Excellency Award at the school festival will go to Class A, which has the highest percentage of aristocrats. Classes swarming with commoners don’t even have the slightest chance at winning.”

The Excellency Award? ...I could guess that it was awarded to the class that earned the most money at the school festival.

“There’s a fundamental difference between nobles and commoners, since the very beginning. I mean, we’re from a higher bloodline, descended from those who fought in the army led by the Demon Lord. On the other hand, the blood coursing through your veins is worthless. By this merit, one might say you’re obviously worth less than cattle—”

Something stopped him short.

As the noble student blabbed on and on, his head jerked backward, and he went sailing through the air.

Someone had kicked him. And that someone was—

“Don’t be dumb!”

It was none other than our very own Ireena, of course. It seemed absolutely no one had expected this from her. As the aristocrats looked on in mute amazement, Sylphy and her gang joined in on the scuffle. Now at center stage, my friend crossed her arms and flashed a look of a pure rage...before she pointed sharply at the student who’d been knocked back, mopping up his nosebleed as he got to his feet.

“We’re all from the same blood! Your blood and my blood and the blood of commoners! We all bleed red! It’s so stupid to discriminate against each other based on this stuff!”

...This reminded me of Lydia, too.

Though I shared the same starting point as Lydia, as we’d both been born as commoners, she’d upheld a creed of equality to the point that she’d picked constant fights against the bigoted nobles who’d believed their stance was justified. None of that had changed, even after we’d both risen in rank... And that’s what I’d liked about her.

“Boss...!” I could only assume that Sylphy had seen hints of Lydia in Ireena, as tears welled up in her doe eyes.

And then, Ireena pointed at the other aristocrats in Class A. “That Excellency Award is ours! There’s no way we’ll lose to you lowlives!”

It was a declaration of war. At this, the nobles all showed their distaste, and their “leader” flashed daggers at Ireena.

“You’ve got some nerve. You’re the daughter of a baron. To think you spit out indignities to the eldest son of a count...!” He pointed at Ireena and made a declaration of his own. “It’s a duel, then. You and me. But it won’t be one of those uncouth magic battles. Well, I guess the school festival is coming up... Let’s just say the winner is whichever class earns the most. If you win, we prostrate ourselves before you and apologize. However, if we win—”

“I’ll do one hundred laps around the school naked and leave the academy!”

“Hmph. Well, you promised. Remember this well, you bottom-feeder—*GACK?! ”*

Another one of Ireena’s kicks sent him flying through the air and knocked him out cold. His followers collected him and hauled him off.

“Boss...! I’m so moved! I’ll follow you forever!”

“It’s never a good look to hurt others, but sometimes, there are special exceptions. Beat them back from now on. I grant you permission.”

Please don’t do it, Ireena. If you do...

“Got it! I’ll annihilate every last prejudiced bigot in the whole entire world!”

Oh no... Things were about to get a lot more annoying around these parts... I heaved an exasperated sigh, prompting Ireena to turn toward me.

“I’m sorry, Ard. I decided everything on my own.”

It was an apology for involving me. As she lowered her gaze in embarrassment, I flashed her the slightest of smiles.

“What are you saying? We’re two hearts that beat as one, right? Your will is mine, Ireena.”

“A-Ard...!”

“As a matter of fact, their remarks got under my skin, too. If we’re in this together, we’ll show them a thing or two.”

“Right! Oh, I love you so much, Ard!” Ireena squeezed me tight, beaming. She was just too cute.

“You’re...kinda logical. If you were actually the Demon Lord, I bet you would be saying stuff like *Commoners? Who needs them?* and *They can all just die*. You know, just totally cruel and inhumane...”

Hey, now. Is that what you think of me?

“...I guess you’re not so bad,” she admitted. I could tell from her smile that she’d accepted me.

For an outsider looking in, it could be seen as pretty charming...but honestly? It just grated on my nerves coming from her.

...Well, at any rate.

“Let us make them regret picking a fight with us.”

CHAPTER 25

The Ex–Demon Lord’s Plans for the School Festival, Part II

Call it coincidence or inevitability, but the period after lunch was set aside to prepare for the school festival.

“Well, then... The school festival means two things for you as students. First, it’s a festival, just like the name implies. It’s a time to let loose and have fun. And the second is that it’s...a major turning point in your life.”

Standing behind the podium, Olivia was in homeroom-teacher mode as she looked out on all the students.

“And I’m not exaggerating, either. Among you, I’m sure there will be those getting a clearer picture of their life path. That’s what makes this a turning point. Also...” Olivia paused for a moment and cleared her throat. “During the festival, you’ll be fighting to make the most profit by yourselves. As for the homeroom teacher, we’ll be assigning scores that reflect your individual performance. These can be grounds for you to advance a level and instrumental in moving your future careers forward. These points will knock your starting point up a level when you’re choosing your future occupations. Meaning this festival is a watershed moment in your life. That’s why you should all give it your best,” she concluded, leaving the podium, and...

She looked straight at me—well, her and every other student.

The instructors were essentially going to be hands-off from here on out, leaving the students to their own devices. Which was why it called for someone to be a program director.

And this role seemed to fall on me. It could have been because I’d been sticking out like a sore thumb lately. It didn’t seem like I could refuse, which is why I got out of my seat and made my way to the front of the classroom.

“All right. I’m afraid I’m not as competent as you think I am, but I’m honored that I get to fill this role.” I looked out across the classroom from the platform that was normally reserved for instructors.

The gazes staring back at me were half full of respect and admiration—and

the other half full of jealousy and hatred. The former was of the commoners, and the latter, the aristocrats. You couldn't exactly say they were unified at the moment... In fact, things were looking pretty grim.

"First, I have news for everyone. For the school festival, we will be putting on a play as another main event, in addition to our traditional Sword King Battle Tournament. We have been given the honor to perform it."

This announcement electrified the classroom as the commoners relished the opportunity to be in the limelight, and the nobles reveled in their delight at the unexpected privilege.

Maybe the play would bring us together, if only for that.

"We were told we may write the script as we see fit. That said... Our subject matter is limited, given the restrictions."

In the modern world, the concept of freedom of expression was largely ignored. In plays, dramas, literature—any creative work was subject to censorship, and any criticism of the royal family or Demon Lord was strictly prohibited. Violators were charged with heavy crimes.

When I had been the ruler, this was not the case. All forms of expression had been accepted, whether it was opinion, ideology, or religion. Times had changed for the worse.

"As for me, I think we should choose an act from the heroic ballad of the Great Demon Lord. All in opposition, please raise your hands," I said, even though I knew no one would.

It was the most simple, boring choice but the best one. As long as we didn't stray from the source material, there wouldn't be any problems, and it would be received well by the public.

The epic of the Great Demon Lord was ancient, but it was a timeless classic, though the Demon Lord himself was conflicted about it for a number of reasons.

Anyway, with none opposed—

"No way! We can't do that! The ballad of the Demon Lord? No chance I'm

doing that!”

...Okay, so we had one.

It was the outsider of the class, Sylphy Marheaven. Her red hair fluttered as she shot up from her chair and shouted at me while glaring. “A story about the Demon Lord is a total snore compared to my sister Lydie! All he did was pick on those who were weaker than him with brute force! If we go with her adventures, I’m sure it’ll be an epic drama that leaves everyone on the edge of their seats!”

...Oh, how I wanted to snap back with a smart-ass comment—and punch the living shit out of her.

That my life had been boring? That I bullied those weaker than me with force? Cut the crap. Back in those days, I’d been in constant crisis and agony.

That’s right—

And it was all your fault!

With Lydia, the two of you ruined every last one of my plans! This is why I had to go through unnecessary suffering. And endure stomach ulcers. And develop a bald spot that you both roared over with laughter.

“Hey, Baldy. Shiny as ever.”

“You should change your name from Varvatos to Gleamatos. It’d suit you way better!”

They had mercilessly teased my baldness. I was still mad at her for it.

Also, to suggest Lydia had interesting adventures? Yeah, maybe. On the outside anyway.

As the involved party, getting mixed up with that fool was no joyride. Just thinking about it made me feel on the verge of a panic attack... *Ah, my stomach...! It hurts...!*

“And so! I won’t accept anything other than the story of her adventures! With Ireena as the star, of course!”

Ireena in the lead role. This was one point where we could agree. I would love

to see my dear friend in the spotlight. After all, she was like a daughter to me.

“Sylphy. I hate to disappoint, but at the headmaster’s request, Ireena and I will be taking the lead roles, which is why I think the tale of the Demon Lord would be the best choice.”

“I don’t give a damn about—”

“Quiet, Sylphy! Don’t cause Ard any trouble!”

“*GWEH?!*” Sylphy succumbed to silence, teary-eyed, when she’d been rebuked by Ireena.

Good work. You’ve never been more of a lifesaver than in this very moment.

“...Well, then. Despite some grievances, it’s been decided that our play will focus on the Great Demon Lord...with me as Great Demon Lord, and as Sylphy has requested, Ireena as Lydia the Champion.”

The commoners looked satisfied enough, but the glares of animosity directed at me from the nobles could kill. It wasn’t like I was doing this for fun. Who in their right mind wanted to play a depressed and glorified version of themselves?

“...Let’s move on and discuss the details.”

This didn’t take much time at all. Since it was required that the script highlight Ireena and me, we could narrow the scenes down to something that focused on the Demon Lord and the Champion.

We decided on a tale where we had suppressed an Evil God.

Everything had been going smoothly so far.

“All right... Is there anyone who would like to play the role of the Evil God?” I asked.

The class was silent. It was understandable enough. In this era, Evil Gods were depicted as wickedness incarnated and regarded as a source of disdain. No one was really out of their seats, jumping up at this opportunity. Even professional performers felt the same way, which was why this role was always decided by lottery.

Maybe we need to do that, too , I thought.

“Guess there’s no choice. If no one else wants to do it, I will,” Sylphy volunteered, raising her hand with a small sigh.

...She’d always been this type of girl, taking on tasks that everyone else refused to do.

From the outside, she appeared to be a troublemaker, but...she was, in fact, someone who cared about and tried to help other people more than anyone else.

Well, it usually backfired, and she *did* end up causing trouble...but I knew her true nature and couldn’t truly say I hated—

“I’ll play the Evil God and challenge you, fair and square! You’ll pay for what you did to me when we were sparring earlier!”

...I guess this was what I got for trying to praise her.

Anyway.

We’d all agreed on the play, leaving the script writing to the students who boasted it as their expertise. Once that was complete, we’d move on to rehearsals.

“Any last comments about the play? No? In that case, let’s discuss our booth... But before that...” I had to explain to our classmates about the mess that Ireena, Sylphy, and I had found ourselves in.

There was sure to be backlash, and I braced myself for it...

“A competition to outsell Class A? Sounds good to me. I never liked those guys anyway.” The commoners were unified in their hatred of nobles in that class.

“Hmph. Our personal opinions don’t matter. Obviously, we would aim for the Excellency Award regardless.” The nobles wanted the prestige and offered no complaints.

Evidently, I’d happily miscalculated their reactions. I’d worried over whether we’d be able to agree on anything, but it seemed that had been for naught.

“All right. Raise your hand if you have an idea for our booth.”

A number of hands immediately shot up. I chose one at random.

“What if we make an attraction using illusionary magic?”

“Hm... Could you be a bit more specific?” I asked.

“I was thinking we could use illusions to allow guests to vicariously experience the life of the Great Demon Lord, and—”

“Hmph. Commoners are so vulgar. Experiencing the life of the Great Demon Lord? How disrespectful,” one of the nobles muttered.

I didn’t see any problem with it, but when it seemed most of the students agreed with this point, I discarded the first suggestion.

There were a number of ideas after that, but we didn’t hit on any winners...

“Wow, commoners. Your thoughts don’t amount to very much. You can’t come up with a single decent idea.”

“*Huh?* You’re ones to talk.”

As the usual arguments threatened to break out, a stormy mood roiled into the classroom.

“Ard, may I?” As if waiting for an opportune moment, Ginny smiled and timidly raised her hand.

“Do you want to share an idea?”

“Yeah. It’s novel *and* traditional *and* certain to turn a profit. What’s more, it has a history of previous sales to serve as a precedent.”

Oh, that sounds incredible.

“...I guess this suggestion is inevitable from a Salvan.” Olivia murmured something rife with meaning. She seemed to know what Ginny had in mind.

As for the proposal... “The Erotic Maid Café. A most excellent and lucrative attraction.”

...What a weird name.

“Um, what is it? This so-called Erotic Maid Café?”

“I’m so glad you asked! Maids are tidy and chaste with a pure-white dignity, free from anything bad. But as their master’s property, they have to obey every single command. I believe everyone knows that this innocence is the breeding ground for dirty thoughts.”

No, we really don’t. Who would ever think that of a maid?

“But! What we want to do is dare to push the limits—to subvert the tropes and be sensual! In particular! We want to take the image of a squeaky-clean maid and turn it on its head! We’ll arouse the desires of gentlemen by having the cutesy *and* sultry maids serve in their usual way—but seductively! That is the Erotic Maid Café! My mother came up with it back in her school days, and it was an enormous success at her festival! They had the most sales in school history!” Ginny explained with passionate gestures.

“The girls will serve in new-and-improved maid outfits! The boys will work in the kitchen! I’ve already finished designing the maid outfit. I’ll pass out the designs right now!”

Ginny distributed her papers, looking all giddy. She had come well prepared. She must have really wanted to do this café idea. Her excitement was childish and honestly adorable—

I looked at the paper passed to me. “...Um, Ginny. Isn’t this a bit much?”

The design on the paper was far from innocent.

First, the top. Wasn’t it more like a bathing suit than an uniform? And there was awfully little coverage. To the point where private areas could peek out if the maid wasn’t careful.

The bottom half didn’t bother to hide anything at all. The skirt was too short, leaving undergarments in full view.

This was...this was an evil scheme for them to entice men with their womanly wiles.

As expected of a succubus. No one was better suited to draw up this plan.

“H-hmm. Th-this seems pretty solid.”

“A-and it’s had a lot of success in the past, too.”

“We have an obvious market, compared to the other suggestions. We can’t get any better than this.”

The boys were all for it. Each one tried to string together some logic, but they really just wanted to see the girls in those outfits. It was almost miraculous that all the girls in our class set the bar high when it came to looks. Anyone would agree Ireena was the cutest, though.

Not that it mattered. As for the girls...

“Wh-what the—?! There’s no way I could wear this!”

“Any woman who would wear this is sick! A total pervert!”

Naturally, there was a loud protest. Nothing to do about it, I suppose. There was no way this would get off the ground. I felt sorry for Ginny, but—

“*Sigh.* You don’t seem to get it. Hear me out. It won’t just be visitors coming to the café; we’ll be entertaining our peers at the academy, who want to come to unwind and catch their breath.”

“That’s exactly why we don’t want to do it! If we’re caught in these outfits, our time at school—no, our entire lives will be—”

“Yes. You’ll be charming students of the academy. In other words, you’ll be able to entertain Ard.”

A moment passed. The girls instantly closed their mouths, putting an end to their protests, and fell into a deep silence.

“And there isn’t anyone in this class who isn’t confident in her body. Imagine yourself in a suuuuper-sexy outfit, serving Ard. I’m sure you all know the future that awaits if you successfully seduce him, right?” she asked.

“All right! I’ll give it all I’ve got!”

“Wow, Ginny, you’re a genius!”

“Ah, I’m burning up with excitement! I’ve gotta choose the right underwear for the deed!”

The girls bustled like generals setting off for war. On the boys’ side, I felt a wave of murderous intent rising off from commoners and nobles alike.

Is this seriously the only proposal everyone can agree on?

...Honestly, I couldn't bring myself to appreciate such a plan, but...

"I suppose it's fine. I agree to it, too," I said.

Sylphy flared up at this. "What?! Y-you're into this sorta thing...? C-come to think of it, the Demon Lord acted straitlaced, but he was actually a horny lecher who did all sorts of nasty stuff...! I knew it! Are you sure you're not the Demon Lord...?!"

Hey! Stop screwing around. Who are you calling a horny lecher?

What do you know about me anyway? To say I was doing all sorts of nasty stuff in secret? With who?

Okay, fine. I admit I had a harem. An all-male one. Every single one was a gross dude.

What kind of kinky stuff would I be doing in secret? Let me hear it. I mean, you should know the truth, of all people.

Ah, dammit. Just thinking about it made me angry. As in the last world, this made me want to sock Sylphy right in the head...but if I did that, it'd be the same as me acknowledging that I was the Demon Lord. Which is why I acted cool and responded with my words.

"Sylphy. I'm not one to relish in scandalous affairs. But in order to win the battle, we must choose the most reliable path... Isn't this what Lydia the Champion—who you love and adore—once said?"

"O-oh, wow! Y-you're right...!"

"Well, at any rate, these outfits will be reserved for those who want to opt in. There may be others who want to serve customers without wearing these costumes. Please prepare a proper maid uniform for those participants. Is that all right, Ginny?"

"Yes, of course."

This addendum was made with Ireena in mind. After all, she just loved to be challenged, which meant she would want to serve customers. Which was a good thing in and of itself. In fact, it was wonderful.

But personally, I didn't want her to expose her skin to the masses. And not because I had some gross desire to monopolize her by claiming her body was mine or something. It was just that...I wanted to protect the purity of my daughter in a way.

“Urrrrrrrrrrgh.....! W-well, my sister Lydie *did* say boys liked sexy stuff... I-I've got no choice if I wanna win! I'll roll up my sleeves and then some!” Sylphy's eyes were burning with passion, as crimson as her hair.

Ginny had a few words of her own. “...No, that's all right. You wouldn't be much help,” she mumbled, zeroing in on Sylphy's chest.

I wondered if the person in question was aware of this, too, as Sylphy's face grew bright red and tears pooled in her eyes. “I-I'll definitely be a big hit! Lydia said my tiny breasts were a rare treasure!”

That's just a lie you tell yourself.

Lydia swung both ways and had slept with well over a hundred women to my knowledge. And they all had huge honkers. Plus, she'd asked me once: “*Hey, Var. What are girls with small tits even living for?*” She was the type of person to say this stupid shit.

...Well, at any rate.

“It seems the school festival will be a circus...”

CHAPTER 26

The Ex-Demon Lord's Plans for the School Festival, Part III

After school at sunset, we walked down the road to our dorm. I was seriously beat. It felt as though time had stretched out at the academy, just a bit. All thanks to Sylphy...who was currently walking right behind me, Ireena, and Ginny, jabbing at our backs with her stares.

I stuck to my policy of ignoring her, but Ginny had reached her limit and whipped around. "Miss Sylphy. How long do you intend on following us?"

"Isn't that obvious?! I'll follow you anywhere!" She gushed, as if confessing her love.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the way she meant it.

...Well, I guess it wasn't *unfortunate* .

"We're returning to our love nest. Outsiders should take themselves elsewhere."

Ginny's attitude was ice-cold, maybe due to Sylphy's hostile stare.

But Sylphy wasn't one to be dissuaded. Rather, the mention of a love nest had piqued her interest. "Wh-what the heck is that?!"

"It's just as it sounds. We all live in the same room."

The same room, huh? She must have been referring to the one she forcefully renovated.

After the incident with Elzard, I began living with Ireena in a single room at the dormitory for aristocrats in order to protect her. That was when Ginny had barged in from next door, pulverizing the wall to make the room big enough for three people.

"L-living together, you say...! I-Ireena, boss, you too?!"

"Of course! Ard and I are two peas in a pod!"

"Gweh?! ...A-Ard Meteor! You wouldn't make a move on my big sister, would you?!"

“Never.”

Ireena was a precious friend whose father entrusted me with her care. I couldn't imagine doing anything to sully the girl more important than life itself.

“Grrrrr...! I can't trust you...! For the Demon Lord to not lay a hand on a beautiful girl...!”

Oh, come on. Why do you think I'm a sex-obsessed lowlife?

In the old world, I'd never even held hands with a decent member of the opposite sex...though I did hold hands with the not-so-decent ones (i.e., Olivia and Lydia).

“Y-you need to be under strict surveillance! I'd initially planned on keeping an eye on you twenty-four-seven! This has me more fired up than ever!”

“What...? Oh dear. You, living with us...? Come now. What a pain. Besides, where would you sleep...?” Ginny eyed her scornfully.

On the other hand... “I don't see the problem. Adding another person isn't a big deal. Besides...with Sylphy around, I'm sure everything will be even more fun.”

“Gweh?!”

Sylphy probably hadn't been expecting this response. Her large eyes filled with tears...which could only mean that she'd tailed us to the dorms because she'd wanted to be friends with Ireena, not just keep an eye on me.

...In that case, I had no reason to refuse. She didn't want to be only Ireena's friend; she wanted to connect with everyone.

If she did that, then even the hole in her heart from constantly losing that which was precious to her might be filled...one day.



As far as Sylphy Marheaven could tell, Ard Meteor had an extremely fast and loose lifestyle. Just living with two girls must have been enough to create sexual tension, but they'd even ended up sleeping in the same bed. Which is why it was super-weird that he hadn't tried to make a move.

Ireena was practically a goddess, and Ginny was charming, too. With tiny

waists, large boobs, and bubble butts, they both possessed a sensuality that Sylphy did not. How could any man keep his hands off them?

It's so suspicious...! I knew it! Ard Meteor must be the Demon Lord...! Meaning he's my enemy! The enmity in her heart for Ard deepened.

And right now, Sylphy was in the middle of something...

"Phew! It's been a while since we've taken a proper bath!"

"I can feel my exhaustion getting washed awaaaaay."

...Specifically, she was in the large public bath attached to the dorms for aristocrats, soaking with Ireena and Ginny.

"Ahhh... These giant baths are the best. It feels extra-nice since I've been taking showers lately," Ireena said, her deep whisper melting into the warm, wafting steam.

As she'd just said, Ireena adored baths, but she hadn't been able to take one for two weeks. This had been under Ard's orders...but from what Sylphy understood, it wasn't anything he deserved criticism for demanding. After all, demons were targeting Ireena, so she left their dorm as little as possible and always had her protector, Ard, with her—which meant putting up with the small bathroom attached to the room.

Because she'd felt sympathetic, Sylphy had negotiated with Ard directly, who conceded, *"...Well, I suppose there's no problem if you're with her."*

And Sylphy had been able to treat the girl who she saw as an elder sister with a relaxing soak in the bath.

"Well then, I think I'm ready to wash up."

"Oh, me too."

Conversing in relaxed tones, Ginny and Ireena stood up, cutting through the bathwater with a splash and exposing their bare bodies.

Their measurements were spectacular. Both had full breasts, yet their waists were suitably taut.

Sylphy looked down at her own chest.

“...It’s okay. I’ll keep growing. I’m sure of it.” Sylphy was dealing with some unidentifiable emotions as she sat there.

“Come and join us. I’ll wash your back.”

She wasn’t expecting anyone to call out to her and involuntarily went “*Gweh?!* ” in surprise.

“What? You don’t want me to?”

“Th-th-th-that’s not it at all! Please!” Sylphy shot out of the bath with an impressive splash of bathwater.

The three moved over to the side wall and sat on stools. Next to Sylphy, Ireena slipped off the washcloth hanging from a rod and lathered it with soap.

“Good work today. Is this your first time in a school?”

“Y-yes, that’s right.”

“I see. You must have been nervous,” Ireena cooed in a gentle voice as she vigorously scrubbed Sylphy’s back.

At times, it was a little intense and painful if Sylphy were being honest. This was...the same pressure as Lydia. In the past, Sylphy had taken a bath with Lydia, who was like a mother and big sister to her. And she’d always scrubbed Sylphy’s back like this.



"I-it hurts, Sis."

"Grin and bear it. This gets the dirt off better."

Memories of those days came rushing back... Before she realized it, Sylphy was sinking into nostalgia.

"Hm? What's wrong? You seem down."

"What? A-ah, no, it's nothing!" She turned to face Ireena, whose puzzled facade was identical to Lydia's stunning face...

"H-hey, Ireena." Sylphy opened her mouth, succumbing to her desires. "D-do you think...we could be friends...?" The last part was barely a whisper because she'd been rejected once before.

And she knew she'd be turned down again, but she wasn't about to give up. She wanted to be Ireena's friend.

After all, Ireena was just like Lydia with her honest heart, and Sylphy wanted to be friends with someone who was really, truly, sincerely wonderful.

"Excuse me? What?" Ireena replied, sounding fed up.

Sylphy slumped her shoulders. So it was hopeless after all.

"Aren't we already friends?"

"...Huh?" She gawked at Ireena with wide eyes.

Ireena continued as she scrubbed over and under Sylphy's arms. "Yeah, I hate anyone who's hostile toward Ard or says heartless things, and I wouldn't want to be friends with them... But well, you're an exception. I can't seem to just leave you be. And besides..."

She paused for a moment and took up a showerhead fueled by sorcery. As it bubbled with warm water from the power of magic stones, Ireena tenderly rinsed the bubbles off Sylphy's body.

"I'm not sure why, but I find you strangely endearing. You made a terrible first impression...but I'm over it now. Which is why we're taking a bath together."

"Y-you really don't hate me?"

“I wouldn’t be washing you right now if I did.”

“A-and you’ll be my friend?”

“I. Just. Told. You. We’re already friends.” Ireena flashed a wry smile that overwhelmed Sylphy.

“*Waaah! Ireeeeeena!*” Sylphy pounced on Ireena.

“Hold on! *Ack?!*” She toppled over from the force of the hug as Sylphy buried her face in Ireena’s huge boobs.

“I did it! I finally made a new friend! *Waaaaaaah!*” She sobbed, producing tears that poured like waterfalls.

Ireena gently stroked her red hair. “Oh, that’s right, you’ve lost one friend after another... In the end, you battled the Evil Gods all alone. That’s when you went missing in action.”

“What?” Sylphy had no recollection of that, but this didn’t seem like the right time to correct her.

“You’ve always been searching for new friends... In a way, I can relate to those feelings.” Ireena let out a soft smile as she continued to run her fingers through Sylphy’s hair. It was almost maternal and made her seem even more like Lydia. “You’re not alone anymore. As your friend, I’ll stay by your side.”

“...Thank you, Ireena.”

They smiled at each other.

This situation...made Sylphy long to see Lydia more than ever.

Where was she? What was she doing right now? It had been thousands of years, but there was no way she could have died.

I’ll find her someday. And then I’ll inform her that I made a new friend with her likeness.

Sylphy smiled softly, projecting that very moment in her mind.

“...What the—? It’s like I’m not even here...,” Ginny murmured with a mixed expression, but neither seemed to notice or care.



The Laville National Academy of Magic.

It was the oldest and best learning institution in the Laville Empire of Sorcery. Its grounds were vast enough to fit a small-scale village and fitted with the usual accoutrements—an athletic field and school buildings—plus, a large structure dedicated to sorcery experiments, an underground labyrinth for incoming and outgoing traffic, and a host of other facilities scattered about its campus.

And it was currently showcasing a completely different scene than its usual affair.

“The third-years in Class B are hosting a sorcery attraction! Come visit—”

“If you visit the booth made by the second-years in Class C, we’ll guide you through a dazzling world of illusions—”

The endless stream of broadcasts dissolved into the hustle and bustle on campus as the academy took on the appearance of a shopping district. Guests meandered through the myriad of student-run shops, big and small, and among the cheerful voices blaring through the space was an anomaly that blended without a trace.

“Heh-heh. It’s good to see everyone overflowing with joy. If it wasn’t for their excitement, the despair and anguish to come won’t look nearly as impressive.” The figure stifled a laugh, taking in the surrounding scene.

A number of costumed students walked the school grounds, which was why this individual in the tailcoat and strange mask went unnoticed—even though this character actually had an unaccountable air. Underneath the mask, this silhouette spun around in a dance, venturing farther into the academy when a certain boy and girl came into view.

Ard Meteor and Ireena Litz de Olhyde.

After observing them stroll through the booths in excitement, the masked figure let out: “Having fun, Ard Meteor? Oh, I imagine you’re having a ball. Passing the time with a friend that you’ve made *at long last* . How very merry. But...I haven’t had my share of fun, unfortunately. And it’s all your fault. Honestly, your existence is beyond saving,” murmured the mask, stifling a chuckle and staring at them fixedly.

“Go ahead and enjoy this to the utmost. Oh, what lies ahead is for the best. Most convenient for you, I’d say. At any rate, Ard Meteor—

“From here on out, your life will crumble and tumble ever downward.”

CHAPTER 27

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Start of the School Festival

The preparations for the school festival went smoothly... *Not*.

Class A had sabotaged us. It had been rather ingenious and caused us a lot of grief... But we somehow came together and managed to make it to the school festival.

Well. It was set to last for a week, and this was only the first day.

In any normal situation, the students were expected to help their own class projects, peek at what the other classes had prepared with their free time, and enjoy the festival to their heart's content...except Ireena, Sylphy, Olivia, and I were working under different circumstances.

We knew there was a possibility of demons showing up during the festival, which was why we decided to split up and patrol the grounds.

"Hey, Ard! Let's go to that shop next!"

...From the outside, we appeared to be having a blast, but I swear we were in full-on surveillance mode.

"This frozen treat is so yummy!"

"Ireena, you have syrup on your cheek."

...And I repeat, we were just pretending to have fun. This way, no one would realize we were on the lookout. It wasn't as if I was having fun at the shops with Ireena. This was *serious* business on behalf of humanity and the world.

...Oh, she was just too adorable.

In our little village, there were never festivals, which could be why she was bopping around, more childlike than usual. I couldn't help but feel paternal love for her. I'd probably agree to anything she asked of me. If she requested half

the world, I'd give it to her in an instant. That's how cute she was. And of course, Ireena was a natural hit at the festival, charming beyond all compare.

"Hey, Irinny! Check out our shop!"

"No, come here! We've got better food over this way!"

At every step, a cavalcade of students called out to her.

Ireena smiled at her situation. "...I feel like I'm dreaming. I never thought I'd be able to make friends with everyone." She looked at me and grinned. "I think my life changed the day I met you. I'd always locked myself away in the house before... I assumed I'd be alone until I died."

It made sense. Considering her lineage, she could only expect a lifetime of misery—for carrying the blood of the Evil Gods. It made her the greatest target for discrimination. She must have lived with the constant fear that her friends would discover her true identity at some point and reject her.

"But I'm not alone. I have you, Ard...and I'm starting to think maybe there are others who will accept me, too. That's why I'm on cloud nine... It's all thanks to you. I'm grateful."

Her smile was captivating and made me blush a little.

"...Oh, what are you saying? I've done nothing. Everything was by your own virtue. We who form strong bonds all gravitate toward the honorable. This was undoubtedly divine providence."

Perhaps out of embarrassment, I began speaking faster than usual.

Ireena giggled as if she knew why.

...It was a very quiet, bittersweet moment.

If only we could live on in peace without worrying about demons. That was all I wished for—from the bottom of my heart.

From then on, Ireena and I continued our patrol as we went about enjoying the festival to the fullest.

We stepped into the courtyard, which was an expansive space without a single shop to be found. As for the reason, it was because this place was sacred.

“This tree gives me the strangest sensation whenever I look at it,” Ireena murmured quietly as her eyes narrowed.

The enormous tree at the center of the courtyard was the reason why this place was considered holy. You had to crane your neck to look up at its grand magnificence, officially known as the Tree of the Sword King.

“Legend has it that the third ruler of Laville...the Great Sword King...sealed away something special here. It gave birth to this Tree, which now protects whatever is hidden away... I’m certain I’m not the only one curious to know what it is,” I concluded.

I glanced quickly at Ireena next to me. She nodded but folded her arms, tilting her head to the side.

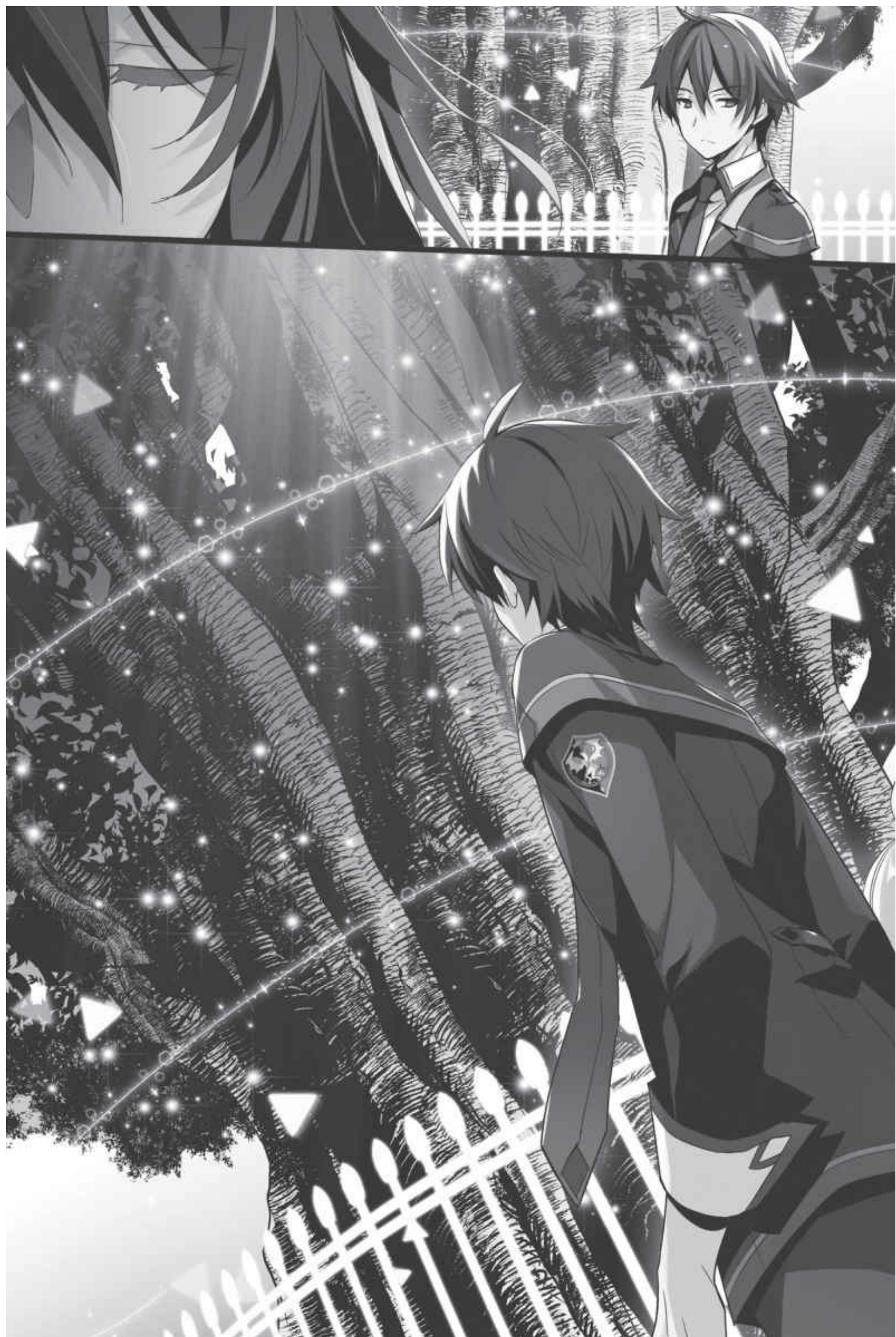
“I’d like to know, too, but even Daddy says he’s not sure.”

Ireena was a member of this nation’s true royal family. Her father, Weiss, was the rightful king, which meant, by all measures, that he had full access to even the most classified of national intelligence.

If he didn’t know... It was possible the answer might be trivial after all.

Nonetheless, I had a bad feeling. It was wise to stay vigilant. To say the demons were targeting only Ireena...would be untrue.

It happened as I gazed tensely at the Tree.



*

BOOOOOOOOOOM!

A loud explosion rang in our ears. Thinking that it could be a demon attack, Ireena and I went on high alert and zeroed in on the direction of the noise.

“Heeeeeeeeeey! You’re a fishy one! Pipe down and turn yourself in!”

“Eeeeeeeeeek?! P-please stop! Just hear me out!”

...The idiotic source of the uproar showed herself, seething with anger and her Demise-Argis in hand in front of a chubby, middle-aged man. The two of us sighed.

“Well, in any case...”

“Should we go speak to that idiot—pardon me—to Sylphy?”

And with that, we made our approach.

“Um, Sylphy? What in the world are you doing?”

“Ard! Ireena! This guy’s a demon! No question!”

“No, no, no, no, no! I’m not! What did I ever do to you?!”

“You look suspicious! And those in your likeness are demons! Now play nice and show us your true form!”

“Eeeeeeeeeek! P-put that sword down! Please!”

As Sylphy continued to create chaos, Olivia came running over, having heard the commotion. As she did, the middle-aged man sprinted over and hid behind her.

“Lady Olivia! Please, help me! This psycho is trying to kill me under false suspiciooooooooooons!”

What? said the look on Olivia’s face as she gazed at us. *“...Hey. Explain what’s going on here.”*

As soon as I informed her of the situation, she immediately gave a heavy sigh.

“...He’s not a demon. He’s an employee of my favorite restaurant with a great prix fixe menu. His fries are first-rate, which was why I was his pupil once. I can

vouch for his identity.”

I see, so that’s what was going on.

...Wait a sec. *Pupil? Restaurant?*

You might be morally depraved, but you’re still one of the Four Heavenly Kings. To think you’d become an apprentice to learn how to fry a potato.

Sylphy broke out in a sweat at the slightest mention of Olivia’s crazed love of potatoes. “I—I guess I messed up again, huh?”

As the events progressed, Sylphy’s eyes welled up with tears from Olivia’s harsh scolding.

“*Haaah...* You’re done patrolling. It was an error in judgment on my part.” Olivia looked like she had a headache and gave a big, fat sigh.

“...Honestly. To cause trouble here of all places, it makes even my blood run cold.” She muttered to herself as she looked at the Great Tree. There was a sense of fear in those eyes...

“Lady Olivia, do you know something about this Tree?”

The question had come out naturally. Olivia looked lost, if only for a moment. She shook her head and turned her back on us.

“...I can’t speak of it, even to you two.”

“Let me rephrase: Is it really that important?”

Olivia left without answering.

“As you mentioned before, Ireena, the Tree of the Sword King awakens the most mysterious emotions.”

It felt nostalgic in some way and repulsive at the same time.

We continued staring at the Tree of the Sword King for a while longer.

CHAPTER 28

The Ex-Demon Lord and an Unexpected Twist

In summary, the first day went by without a hitch, aside from the mess that Sylphy made. And as dawn broke, the curtains rose on the second day of the school festival. The sun streamed down, illuminating the earth, as we welcomed another breezy blue sky that stretched for miles.

There seemed to be more foot traffic compared to the day before. The people strolling around the festival were becoming more energetic by the second.

Through the throng of guests, I was on patrol alone. I would essentially be moving independently from this day forward. Since Sylphy had been ordered to wait on standby at our class booth, Ireena had to cover for the areas that would have been under her surveillance.

It went without saying that I was keeping a constant eye on Ireena, and she'd immediately contact me if anything went awry.

That said, the demons hadn't shown the slightest hint of themselves so far. Maybe the threat was a fake. I guarded the campus, suspicious of their movements.

"Ugh. An hour wait? That's so annoying."

"Not much we can do. It's cheap *and* quality food. That doesn't happen often."

"You got me there. Guess I'll stick it out."

The clamor of conversation filled my ears and caught my attention, coaxing me to take a peek. I spotted a long line of people snaking from a single stall.

In that moment, I realized that those guys engaged in that conversation had ulterior motives to enter a shop with an hour wait: the Bikini Girls Café.

Those boys weren't looking for a "quality" meal. They weren't here to satiate

their physical hunger. No, they were acting on pure, carnal desire.

And the ones managing this obvious knockoff of our own booth were none other than—

“Oh, what’s this? Well, if it isn’t the son of the Great Mages. What brings you here?” someone provoked in a cheery, derisive voice as I was in mid-thought.

The students from Class A.

It was a cluster of five aristocratic students who eyed me with overflowing animosity.

“...No reason in particular. I’m on patrol and happened to pass by.”

Their leader sneered. “Yeah, right. I mean, you are a vulgar commoner. Are you sure you didn’t come here to scope our shop?”

Our shop. That’s right. The Bikini Girls Café was run by Class A.

They had the gall to steal our idea right under our noses. Well, if that was all they did, I wouldn’t have had a bone to pick with them. But based on the rumors, they had hired a top chef to spearhead all the food prep and even handpicked the most beautiful women in the royal capital to be their waitresses.

“...Well, I’ll give it to the members of Class A for their expertise in loan management.”

Each class had to make do with their provided budget for the festival, but that amount wasn’t enough if you had grand ideas for your class booth, which is why it would be essential to come up with more cash. This had resulted in our class making a few arrangements, including signing a forward contract, to double our budget...but to pull off the magnitude of Class A’s booth, I imagined they would need around eight times what they were given.

“How did you manage to secure substantial funds in such a short amount of time? I would love to learn a thing or two from you.”

“Hmph. Even if a commoner knew the aristocratic way to manage finances, it would be a waste of time and resources on your end,” he snapped back, sneering. But I could see a single drop of sweat trickle down his calm facade.

It was so obvious. He was basically confessing they had cheated by padding their budget.

“...Well, I’ll take my leave and continue the patrol.”

“Good luck. You’ll need it. I mean, you can try all you want, but we’ll still come up victorious in the end.” He chuckled, openly mocking me as I turned my back on him.

I sighed grievously. I knew I would find skeletons in their closets if I could just crack them open—leading to their possible disqualification. But...I would make a point not to do that.

We would continue the battle despite their advantage. And we would win. I wouldn’t be satisfied otherwise.

...I guess I’m getting riled up, too. I let my feet instinctively carry me to our booth.

The sign advertised THE EROTIC MAID CAFÉ , which couldn’t be easier to understand. The queue outside was no less inferior to Class A’s booth.

“Hmm. It’ll take a while before I can get in,” I observed.

I’d wanted to see everyone at work, but that didn’t seem possible. As I’d told the students of Class A, I was on patrol, which meant I had no time to spare. I was satisfied enough confirming that business was boom—

“Raaaaaaaah! Whaddaya think you’re doing, buddy ?!” resounded an all-too-familiar voice, echoing around us in all its idiotic glory.

Through the booth wall, a golden torrent blasted out with fury.

Change of plans. By pardoning the disturbance, I cut in line to get inside, apologizing to the guests in the queue. As soon as I entered the booth, a girl appeared before my eyes—a dolt donning a skeevy, reimagined maid outfit...

Sylphy. She was on her tiptoes, her itty-bitty stature stretched out to its fullest height, with the Holy Sword Demise-Argis poised against a guest.

“Youuuu! You touched my butt just noooow! Perverts get the death sentennnce!”

“Eeeeeek?!”

Déjà vu. I saw this same scene yesterday.

...Anyway. I interrupted and subdued her mindless stampeding, then banned the guest who had caused the disturbance from the shop and escorted him out.

As for the giant hole in the wall created by this fool...I had no choice but to do something about it with magic.

“W-wow...! It looks as if you’re rewinding the accident...!”

“T-to manipulate time! Ard, that’s sick...!”

“Oh, I want to marry him...! I’m serious...!”

The girls rocking their reimagined maid outfits shot me gazes filled with passion.

“...This isn’t anything to get excited about. It’s just revival magic that I tinkered and changed. Anyone can do this minor trick,” I claimed before giving Sylphy a stern lecture.

After I made sure she’d sufficiently reflected on her actions, I sighed. “Well then, I shall take my leave—”

“Oh, don’t say that! You’ve come all this way! Allow us to indulge you with our hospitality!” Ginny trotted over, flashing me a broad smile, slipping her arm through mine, and pressing her huge breasts into me... I watched as my arm sunk between those flushed twin peaks and felt their incomparable softness that eroded my grasp on all reason.

“O-okay. Just a short while...,” I blurted out, which was peculiar.

Ginny let a dark smile play across her lips. “All right! Just as we rehearsed! Think of this as the place where the one hundred women of Ard’s harem will be selected!”

““““Yes ma’am!”””” A gaggle of girls shouted back, as if they were part of a well-trained army. And it wasn’t just the ones in between helping customers. Even the ones serving others abandoned their duties on the spot as they collectively moved with elegance and unerring accuracy. All to welcome me.

When I got a glimpse of their focused expressions, I couldn't even joke that I thought abandoning the other customers was a bad idea. I was being looked at with the intensity of a carnivore circling its prey.

"First, greetings! Three, two, one!"

""""Welcome home, Master!"""" They formed a single line and bowed in perfect unison as gravity pulled their breasts down, down, down, emphasizing their form. This had to be intentional.

Under normal circumstances, when taking in their sexy silhouettes, I wouldn't be able to help but feel the heat rising in the room, but...

"Next, guide him to his seat!"

""""Yes ma'am! Right this way, Master!"""" All the girls had bloodshot eyes that petrified me. I felt like I'd been tossed into a pack of ravenous animals.

Sure, their looks were overflowing with sex appeal, but...I wasn't stimulated. Maybe it was due to the transparency of their ulterior motives.

""""What would you like to order, Master?! A drink? A bite to eat? Or maybe you'd like to order *me* ? That's my personal recommendation, Master!""""

"...All right, I'll have a drink. One orange juice, please."

""""Understood! One glass of extra-creamy milk, coming right up! Here you go! Help yourself to our boobs!""""

"No one asked for such a thing!"

A horde of girls pressed their boobs against my body. Hospitality? It was more like a full-on hunt.

And during this scandalous merrymaking, Ireena entered the booth, as if by a cruel trick of fate. "Wh-wh-wh-wh-what are you doing?!"

"Serving the master. What of it?" Ginny provoked, ready to start an altercation on the spot.

"S-serving him? I can do that, too! Easy!" Ireena yelled, disappearing to the back of the shop for a short while.

"Wh-what do you think? Do I look okay?"

To go toe to toe against Ginny was the only reason Ireena had slipped into the new-and-improved maid outfit. I was sure of it.

And the moment she revealed herself, all those bastards in the booth whooped and cheered.

The risqué outfit had been sewn together exactly as Ginny had intended on paper. The top was an avant-garde fusion of a maid uniform and the tiniest bikini...which meant it exposed Ireena's silky white skin and supple breasts that grew full over the years. One wrong move, and her private parts would be on display for the world to see. It was a risky situation.

The bottom half, on the other hand, didn't bother to hide anything. It was questionable whether the skirt served a purpose, and her fleshy butt covered in a black thong was completely out in the open.

...I want to pluck out the eye of every dirtbag drooling over and ogling her. A-a-as your father, I can't let you leave in this immodest outfit!

"I-Ireena. Please change into the normal maid outfit."

"No! I'm going to serve you in this!"

"B-but aren't you embarrassed?" I asked, and her face became flushed as she looked away.

Her thighs brushed up against each other as she fidgeted. "I-it's not embarrassing at all. I-if I'm being honest...I get really excited when people look at me naked—ever since I was kidnapped."

By that, she must have been referring to the incident with Elzard...which was when she'd been stripped to absolutely nothing, giving the host of demons full access to her velvety skin.

So this is why she has this weird kink.

I've never been more enraged as when I thought of the culprits, Elzard and the demons—Elzard in particular. If we were to meet again, I'd beat her into a bloody pulp.

"I-Ireena! Boss! Y-you look so sexy...! Geh. Geh-heh-heh...!" spouted some idiot, coming close to discovering a weird preference for herself. But I didn't

care about that.

“I’ll serve Ard and wait on his every need! The rest of you, back off!”

“Miss Ireena! You’re so pushy! You have to understand that Ard is everyone’s master!”

“““Yes, that’s right!”””

“Ugh! Enough already! You’re all so annoying! Ard is mine! And my master alone!”

“We shouldn’t be fighting! H-how about we split the difference...and let me do the serving?!”

“No, Sylphy. I would appreciate it if you quietly wait on the sidelines.”

“Gweh?!”

In the Erotic Maid Café, the squabbling among the girls carried on for some time.

...The War to Serve ended at long last, and peace settled back on the booth. Traffic was beginning to die down.

“Um, Ard. Might I have a moment?” Ginny called out.

I would have used patrolling to excuse myself if I thought she wanted to capture a steamy moment together...but she seemed completely serious.

I allowed myself to be led to the back at her will. Ireena and Sylphy followed close behind, but Ginny tolerated this without complaint as we entered the break room. With no one else around, it was the right setting for some real conversation.

“...I have news regarding our competition and outselling Class A. If we don’t take proper measures, I’m certain we’ll lose.”

“Wha—?!” Sylphy yipped as Ginny looked at us anxiously.

Ireena gazed at me with a troubled expression.

“Hmm. What is your basis?” I asked.

“Right. I sent out a number of people for reconnaissance...and unfortunately

they cannot help but admit the superior quality of their food and girls. And that directly correlates to their number of customers.”

“Which means there’s already a discrepancy in sales.”

“Th-th-th-th-this is bad! What do we do...?!”

“And how big of a gap is it?”

“I can’t tell you the exact numbers...but I would estimate their profits to be one and a half times greater than our own.”

Hmm. A sizable difference.

“We-we’ve gotta do something...! Oh, I—I know! Maybe we could use the play to advertise?! Then we’d totally get more guests!”

“That is true. As Sylphy suggested, our performance will be an ideal opportunity to promote ourselves... But...”

“Those guys in Class A have already planned ahead with that in mind.”

“Oh yes. There’s no question they have an ace up their sleeve.”

Meaning we needed another counterstrategy ourselves.

“...I suppose this is where I must revive the trusted tradition of erock tic-paper-scissors,” Ginny suggested, spouting a string of weird words.

“To all on campus! The Sword King Battle Tournament has come again this year! It is a festival of swordfighters dedicated to the legacy of the third king of Laville! As always, participants from all walks are invited to apply, including outsiders! The deadline is two PM today. Don’t miss—,” blared a broadcast over the speakers, echoing through the break room.

Sylphy jumped to her feet with a loud clatter. *“Th-this is itttttttttttttttt!”* she roared, looking up at the sky as if she were a sage struck by divine revelation. “Everyone will be at the Sword King Battle Tournament! We’ll totally sweep the competition! And we can promote the shop in every fight!”

Hmm. We had done something very similar back in the old days: In arenas, fighters had engaged in their daily battles donning garments adorned with company names as walking advertisements. It had been supereffective.

“Sounds good to me. I was thinking about joining myself.” Ireena looked as though she was reminiscing. “Daddy entered before, too. He looked so cool holding up his reward, the Holy Sword replica, looking like an epic painting...”

“Holy Sword replica? What is that?”

It was Ginny who offered up an answer. “It’s said to be a treasure from the third king of Laville himself. He had worshipped Lydia the Champion and made a replica of her. This became a national treasure.”

...Her Holy Sword, huh. It wasn’t something I wanted to see anytime soon, replica or not. At any rate, that sword was...

“Continuing on. When our school was founded, the king entrusted the replica of the Holy Sword to the academy in hopes that it might attract those worthy of it.”

“...Is it wise to offer something so valuable as a reward? The tournament is open to all, right? That means...”

“Right. Outsiders can win and carry off the national treasure.” Before I could finish my sentence, Olivia had entered the room at some point, apparently, and spoken up. “But that replica has history. To make matters worse, it always ends up returning to the academy in no time at all... Like it’s looking to fit back in its sheath.”

She made it sound like she wanted someone outside the school to whisk it far away from the academy until the end of time. This weighed on me, but based on how she was acting, I could tell she wasn’t about to divulge the truth anytime soon.

“Anyway. I plan on being in this year’s tournament, too,” she added.

“Oh my... I guess the winner is already decided, then.”

The Sword King Battle Tournament involved two things: sword skills and body-strengthening magic. If those were the conditions, we could scour the entire world, and Olivia would still go unrivaled. Which she should know better than anyone. Why would she be interested in participating—?

“No. It’s too soon to declare me the victor. As for why... Ard Meteor, you’ll be

entering, too.”

“...What?” I let slip past my lips, revealing my real voice, struck down from the blow of this bombshell. “N-no, no, no—no—no. What are you talking about, Lady Olivia? For me to participate—”

“Sorry, but I already signed you up.”

What are you trying to do to me, huh?

“B-but making a spectacle of my power is—”

“Shut it. I don’t care about whatever you’ve got going on. If you plan on refusing...I might just decide to take a certain matter into my own hands. That okay with you?”

Th-this damn...!

That matter in question would unveil my true identity—whether I was the Demon Lord. Basically, she was implying that to prove my innocence, I had no choice but to fight in the tournament in a way that dispelled her suspicions...!

“Hee-hee-hee. This will be fun. We’ll finally get to settle things once and for all.” Olivia grinned in a way that was too fabulous, which instinctively made me want to hurl.

“I might enter, too, if Ard is participating. Teach me your sword moves by drilling it into me. ♡”

“...That sounds like a convenient excuse for you to get in a mix-up and take advantage of him,” snapped Ireena.

“Goodness. That’s what they call distrust, Miss Ireena.”

“I don’t know about that. All succubi are from a perverted race with their heads full of sex all year round. I can’t exactly trust you.”

“...Hey, Miss Ireena. You can smack-talk me all you want, but be a dear and stop insulting my people, would you?”

“Nooope. I’m just speaking the truth.”

They shot daggers at each other.

“Come to think of it, we were unable to settle matters at the Battle Event last

time... I'll beat you this time around. Prepare yourself."

"Give it your best shot, you dirty succubus."

Their bodies were enshrouded by an intense determination to battle it out that radiated off them and clashed against each other. But the situation now brewing between them was far beyond my interest.

Inside my mind, one phrase echoed over and over like a refrain. And that was

—

Why did things turn out this way?

CHAPTER 29

The Ex–Demon Lord in a Famous Performance

The Laville National Academy of Magic spanned an unnecessarily large plot of land, which housed a massive stadium. I had been wondering when we'd use it, and it was apparently for the Sword King Battle Tournament.

Now, back to my current situation.

I was in a waiting room with the other participants, regretting this entire thing. This room was large enough to comfortably fit nearly one hundred people, and in the middle stood a giant crystal ball that broadcast the entire arena on its reflective surface. It was a sorcery projector, which seemed to be the latest breakthrough in the magical sciences. The crystal depicted a packed stadium and the commentator riling them up. Headmaster Golde was probably beside himself with glee at the great turnout.

“Aaaand the Sword King Battle Tournament is here! No changes to the rules or procedures! You can only rely on your sword to do battle and magic to physically strengthen your body! Anything else will be immediately disqualified!” After explaining the rules, the commentator went into how the tournament would work. *“Today marks the first day of the preliminary tournament. The participants will be separated into eight brackets. Only the winner of each bracket will earn the right to compete in the battle on the final day of the festival!”*

The preliminaries would span three days. I was sure they could get it done in a day; this was a sneaky way to profit from multiday entrance fees.

“No changes to the rules, proceedings, and reward granted to the victor—but! Have no fear! You won't even have a moment to feel bored. As for why... Among our participants are three who are far beyond the norm!”

In response, those who were thought to be the participants in question

assumed new expressions.

First was Ireena standing next to me, puffing out her chest with a proud expression that practically screamed *That's me, hee-hee*. Super-adorbs.

And a bit farther away from us, Olivia was leaning against the wall with her arms crossed in contemplation. She gave a sigh as if to say *You've gotta be kidding me*.

As for the last participant...

"Beyond the norm, huh? Flattery won't get them anywhere!"

Sylphy was beaming bashfully.

"Our first two Beyonders are enrolled at our very own academy! You know them: the son and daughter of our Great Heroes! With the most recent demon incident tucked under their belts, my heart pounds in anticipation for what they'll show us next! And lastly! What's this?! I—I can't believe it! It's the myth, the living legend! The pinnacle who paved the way for all swordfighters! Yeah, that's right—one of the Four Heavenly Kings! Lady Olivia vel Viiiiiiiine!"

The arena held its breath for a moment before breaking out into wild cheers. While the fervor was earth-shattering, the competitors on standby in the waiting room were over the moon.

"Olivia vel Vine... They can't mean the real deal?"

"To challenge the swordmaster...! There is no greater honor...!"

Olivia took their heated passion in stride. She must have been pretty used to it. Her eyes remained closed, and her meditative pose didn't change in the slightest.

...On the other hand, there was Sylphy, who had gotten her hopes up and then dashed for nothing.

"Huh? Wh-what about me? Hey, what about me?"

"...Well, keep your head up. I'm sure there's something great out there waiting for you someday." Ireena comforted Sylphy, who was trembling in tears.

...Well, then. With the preamble concluded, the first day of the preliminaries began at last. One after another, participants rose to the stage and engaged in swordplay—among them were masters and other talented pros... And there were four to watch out for in particular. Oddly enough, they were all connected with one another.

First, there was a certain someone.

“Raaaaaaargh!”

Yeah, I was talking about Ireena, the gifted girl I’d been training since childhood. Obviously, she was magically skilled, and her sword skills matched the experts.

It was an easy victory, and she advanced to the second day.

On to the second participant.

“Oh, Aaaaaaard! Are you watchiiiiing?! I won!” Ginny the Succubus grinned, flashing me a peace sign next to her fallen foe.

Her opponent had been spirited, and I’d expected a tough fight...but Ginny overturned her situation and proved herself with a quick victory.

There wasn’t a hint of fragility in her face, unlike the first time we’d met. At this rate, she’d go far in the struggle for supremacy.

...And the third participant.

“You kn— Aaaaaaaaagh!”

That moron, er, well, Sylphy. As for her, it was a given that she would win.

Even though she was unfortunately who she was, Sylphy was from the ancient world. For as long as I could remember, she had always fought as Lydia’s protégée ever since Lydia took her in. She didn’t have a long battle record, but it had been nothing short of brilliant... If she had stayed in the army, she would have established herself as a god slayer. It wasn’t as though Lydia would have been crazy enough to entrust a Holy Sword to Sylphy otherwise.

Who knew? Maybe she would even lead the pack of potential victors.

...And last but not least. You know who it is.

“Sigh. I figured this would be boring.”

My big sister, Olivia vel Vine.

With a renown that rattled the earth, she was celebrated as the greatest swordfighter in history. That reputation was in no way exaggerated. In truth, there was no one greater before her and none would come after. With the decline in magical energy, her strength wasn't what it used to be back in her heyday... But even so, no one in this era was any match for her.

Her opponent was a renowned swordfighter but forfeited the moment she came into view without making a single move, as if certain of the difference in their power.

As a result, Olivia won without having to fight at all.

...And then there was me, the main event. If I lost these preliminaries, Olivia would definitely know it was on purpose. Which was why I'd harmlessly play along and move forward into the second day. I'd throw the real battle. Go up against Ireena or Ginny and lose. That'd be the ideal scenario.

...But life tended to hate me, so I didn't hold my breath.

Whatever.

Day one of the Sword King Battle Tournament came to a close without any problems to speak of.

After I'd made it through the second day of the tournament that I'd been unexpectedly tossed into, I prayed things would go smoothly on the third day of the school festival. But I knew it would be difficult.

After all, it was the opening day of our class play.

“I—I have a tiny part...but I-I'm awfully nervous.”

We were backstage. Ginny was doused in sweat as she listened to the audience trickle in. She wasn't the only one. The entire class, from the aristocrats to the commoners, couldn't seem to relax.

In particular...

“I—I—I—I—I wonder i-i-i-if I'll do o-o-o-kay?”

“Y-y-y-y-you’ll be fine. Th-th-th-th-this is nothin’. L-l-l-l-let’s have a blast.”

Of the play’s three main characters, the villain and the heroine had the most stage fright of all.

Ireena and Sylphy. Both were sweating buckets, and their bodies vibrated with enough speed to leave an afterimage.

“...Please try to calm down. There is no need to worry about putting on a perfect play or meeting audience expectations. They will be pleased enough to see two radiant girls onstage. All you need to do is recite the prepared lines and tack on some appropriate gestures. And then it’ll be all over. Please be at ease...”

“R-r-r-r-right! I-i-i-it’s just as Ard say-says-sa-sa-sa-sa...”

“I-l-l-I’m totally re-re-re-relaxed n-n-n-n-now! Th-th-th-thank y-y-y-y...”

We were doomed.

I couldn’t help but feel complete and utter panic. If possible, I hoped we’d never begin. But time was cruel and passed... And at last, the curtain drew up on our stage.

Initially, everything went according to script. We reached the point where the main heroes, the Demon Lord and the Champion, suppress the Evil God Avia Desa Virus.

“I-i-if you can hear my voice! St-stand and fight! I will not allow surrender!”

Face an army of her enemies and rouse her own half-destroyed forces. That was the scene Ireena was tasked with.

She’d been so nervous before the curtains rose, but everything was going well so far.

The same went for Sylphy.

“M-mwa-ha-ha-ha! Writhe in fear, you lowly peons!” she recited in a monotone, but her pretend combat was flawless. She was all muscle, even down to her brains. Her body moved on its own regardless of her emotions.

I hoped to continue at this pace until the very end.

“Our military strength shall smite the enemy! Follow me, the Demon Lord, into battle!”

Th-this is so embarrassing! Worse than I anticipated...! Why do I have to play this sullen, glorified version of myself?

“Eeeeeek! Ard, you’re amazing!”

“You’re like the real Demon Lord! Supercool!”

These shrill screams reached me during my performance...

I’ll have you know, the real Demon Lord wasn’t cool in any way, shape, or form during battle.

...Argh, this is making me remember stuff against my will.

Avia Desa Virus was one of the Evil Gods...known back then as the Outer Ones. The details leading up to their suppression were unforgettable.

Every Outer One possessed power abnormal in the extreme. There was no telling how much tragedy would ensue whenever we fought against them.

We lost something precious each time.

In terms of our long battle-torn history, the fight to suppress Avia Desa Virus was particularly distinct.

It was long ago. In order to topple a certain man hiding away within the castle that he’d built in the middle of a wasteland, we had erected a barrier around it to prevent him from escaping and held a war council to plan our next move. Gathered there had been Lydia’s forces and the main ones who served me. We were twelve in total: Each was monstrous enough to take on a thousand men. Any of us could independently overthrow a large nation with ease.

As I glanced at these distinguished figures, I spoke. “...The start will be the same as always. Lydia and I will rush in and gather intel on the enemy. Those who object, raise your hand.”

The one to object had been twelve-year-old Sylphy.

“I can’t trust you to have my sister’s back! That’s why I’ll—”

“Shut your damn mouth,” Lydia warned coldly, causing Sylphy to jump in her

own skin.

Under normal circumstances, Lydia would have never spoken to Sylphy, who was like a beloved little sister to her, in such a way. It was only because she'd been backed into a mental corner.

It made sense. Lydia had lost many loved ones in the fight against the Evil Gods. She was the woman who, in any typical battle, would ruin my plans and push through with reckless, idiotic abandon...but she could read the vibe in these types of situations.

"B-but!"

"...I told you to shut it. Didn't you hear me?"

Say more, and I'll make you shut up, her face cautioned.

Sylphy's expression fell as her eyes grew wet with tears.

...This was a form of Lydia's love. It ensured Sylphy couldn't act out of line, meaning the chances of losing her in battle would grow slimmer.

What appeared as insensitivity had been born out of love for her little sister. But Sylphy had been even younger at the time and found it tough to piece together Lydia's true intentions.

"But I... I...!" She hung her head, and tears began to flow in frustration.

I had wanted to say a word or two, but there was no time. We were right in the middle of enemy territory. We didn't know when they'd attack. I hardened my heart and continued the council.

"While we're fighting... Verda, you analyze the enemy. Research every nook and cranny."

"You got it! My *beat* 's *heart* -ing! Just kidding! Hyuck-hyuck-hyuck!" the brains of our army, one of the girls in the Four Heavenly Kings, darkly chortled.

"Olivia. You prepare for any unexpected situations. If Lydia and I are taken out, and Verda still hasn't come up with a solution to get you guys out, take our place."

"...Right. Leave it to me." She nodded obediently and opened her eyes. You

wouldn't mistake her for anything other than a seasoned warrior.

"Lizer. You handle logistics. Back up Lydia and me, or if it comes to it, Olivia. I leave the method up to you."

"I understand perfectly." He nodded vigorously. The old veteran tasked with managing the Four Heavenly Gods was the one constantly working behind the scenes. With him here, I could proceed without worry.

...Then, I looked toward a certain man. "Alvarto. You...do as you like. Run across the battlefield however you please," I said.

He possessed a feminine beauty that was unrivaled. His face twisted into an insane smile. "Oh-ho. Looks like you know how I operate. In that case, I guess I should do as my master orders. I'll be sure to send them on a first-rate trip to hell."

This man was originally an enemy...who had joined our ranks to have a closer shot than anyone at killing me. I didn't trust him one bit, but I did trust his power. Which was why I had made him one of the Four Heavenly Kings.

I knew his crazed urge for bloodshed would tear up the battlefield yet again. After that, there was no question we'd annihilate the enemy with one finishing move.

Lydia had directed the positions of her own troops.

"Ha-ha. You worms are so spirited," echoed a voice within our minds. Yes, this was the enemy. *"I'll be waiting until tomorrow at noon. Go ahead and make your elaborate schemes... Tonight, eat your favorite foods, and for those with lovers, hold them tight until they cannot stand it any longer. By tomorrow, you'll never do any of those things again. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"*

The laughter trailed off...and disappeared.

After that, just as the enemy had said, we made our plans and dispersed.

It happened as I was passing the night alone in camp.

"H-hey, Var. Can I talk to you for a sec?" Sylphy asked meekly, which was rare for her.

"What's wrong? I was certain you'd be with Lydia."

“I do want to be with her...but she’s been prickly with me...”

“Hmm. Meaning you can hardly get near her... But why come to me?”

Sylphy clenched her fists tightly. “Is it impossible for me to take her place...? Even at the war council meeting, I was told to wait on standby with the rear guard... A-am I useless to the two of you...?”

Those large eyes were glistening with tears that could overflow at any moment.

“Even I... Even I can do things right...! I won’t be a burden... I’m strong enough now to protect everyone...!”

The words tumbled out of her of their own volition.

...I was usually pretty harsh when it came to dealing with her.

But I just didn’t have it in me to act that way. “...We do acknowledge you. Both Lydia and me. We’re fully aware.”

“Then why?! Why am I always being left out?!”

“It’s because we don’t want to lose you, especially Lydia... I’d been forbidden from saying this, but given the circumstances, I think it’s okay,” I prefaced, staring fixedly into Sylphy’s eyes. “Lydia hopes to make you her successor one day. In my opinion, I’d like you to be the next one to take up her forces, too. You’re as short-tempered and foolish as her...but no one is more willing to fight for the sake of others. That’s why we can’t let you die.”

That left Sylphy in shock. Her face hinted *I can’t believe you thought that of me*. But it was obvious she had some trouble accepting it, perhaps due to her youth.

“B-but...I want to be out there some more...together with my sister Lydie...so I can have the chance to be useful to you!”

To be useful to you. That was the first time she’d said such a thing.

I had thought of her as a dumb pest who tried to challenge me to a duel with every little thing. But when she showed this side, I couldn’t hate her.

As if she was suddenly ashamed of her raving speech, her face grew crimson

as an apple, and she groaned as if regretting she'd said anything at all.

Seeing this Sylphy made me smile. I approached her petite frame and patted her red hair.

"And that's fine. When the time comes, do as you wish. Lydia might scold you later, but...when the time comes, I'll be there to defend you. Act as you see fit. I'll take responsibility."

"V-Var...! Thank you! I'll do my best!" She clung to me weeping. I rubbed her back.

"But think of your health first and foremost. If you died... Well, it'd make me sad, too." This uncharacteristic sentiment made me red in the face.

...At the time, I had thought it was nice we'd finally been able to have a heartwarming conversation.

I never dreamed of the situation it would bring about.

...The next day, the enemy came out of the castle to face us at noon as promised.

Avia Desa Virus in crimson armor. An imposing countenance daunted all who gazed upon him. The average person would be driven to unconsciousness from eye contact.

Sure enough, my forces and Lydia's army suffered heavy casualties upon his arrival. We hadn't even had the chance to fight yet. I knew this battle would be another violent struggle to the death.

With this premonition in mind, we readied ourselves.

"Heh-heh. You've brought down many of my brethren up until now, but...your advances end today," the adversary murmured, certain of victory and releasing a flash and clap of thunder out of a hand. "The Holy Sword Demise-Argis. I'll slaughter you with the greatest treasure in my possession."

As one who was ever close to being a god, the monster readied the large golden blade, spitting, "Come, you pests. I'll teach you true despair," and taking a step closer.

Beep.

I thought I heard an odd sound.

The next instant, a large magic circle manifested beneath the enemy's feet, and...

Boooooooooooooom! With an ear-splitting explosion, Avia Desa Virus's entire body combusted into flames.

Whaaaat...? All our jaws dropped in dumbfounded confusion.

And then the heat began to die down.

"U-ugh... Th-this is..."

Whaaaat...? Our mouths remained slack when we witnessed the mangled armor of our enemy come into our line of sight...

Then it happened.

Lydia roared a ferocious laugh and leaped forward to attack. *"Raaaaaah!"*

"What? W-wait... *Aaaaagh?!*" screeched the enemy, who must have suffered incredible damage.

Lydia sliced through the foe in a single stroke—crimson armor and all—without giving any chances to dodge the mighty swing of her sword.

...Avia Desa Virus.

Our enemy's dying words: "H-how absurd! F-for me to...! To suffer this humiliating death...!"

But in the end...

"Grrrrrregh...! I regret it all...! Filled with enough remorse to drive one mad...!"

...It was a hopelessly pathetic display, even for a foe.

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I did it! I really did it! My trap got that Outer One good!" Sylphy had come to stand next to me at a certain point, puffing her small chest out proudly.

...This would have been the moment to offer her praise...if this had been anyone other than Sylphy.

"Grrrr...! Sylphy Marheaven! You've done it now! You've completely

squandered our anticipated battle!” shrieked Alvarto, who must have placed high expectations on this fight.

His beautiful face was twisted in rage as he stomped over. “How are you going to make up for this charred body?! Now that it’s come to this, my Lord, we should have her—”

Then it happened.

Beep.

That sound again...and a magic circle stretched beneath Alvarto’s feet. In the next instant, a sea of flames erupted from the ground, as before.

After a while, the heat finally began to die down, revealing the scorched figure of the most battle-crazed one in my forces, who had crumpled over in a gross display.

““““Masterrrrrrrrrrrr?! D-damn you—!”””” screeched Alvarto’s band of war-crazed idiots, launching themselves at Sylphy.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep—beep—beep—beep—beep.

BOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

His soldiers dropped to the ground as charred corpses. My cheek started to twitch at the situation, and I whipped around to face Sylphy.

“...Hey, Sylphy. You set up these traps, right?”

“Yep! Heh-heh! I’ll be taking home all the glory this time!”

“Yes, exactly. You’re completely right. But I’d like to confirm one thing before that.”

“Huh? What’s that?”

“...I bet you remember where you laid out every single trap, right?”

“What? Don’t be stupid. There’s no way I can remember all of them. I mean, I set them in every corner of the battlefield. Like, way more than a thousand—or two. There’s no way I could ever—”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I see. Then, do me a favor and tell *this big old idiot* one thing, Sylphy: How the hell are we supposed to get out of

here?”

“Ah. Th-that would be...with, um, fighting spirit—”

“*Yeah right, you dumbassssssssssssssssssss!*” I gave her a king-size hit to the noggin as a thank-you gift.

...After we all finished dealing with the dramatic debacle that ensued as we crossed the battlefield, I was left with two-thirds of my forces out of commission... In all honesty, this was the biggest blow that my troops had ever sustained.

“Your true enemies are closer than you think, huh... Words of wisdom from past strategists... I’ve never experienced this more clearly until now...,” I mumbled in exhaustion.

Sylphy was glowering next to me on the verge of tears. “U-ungh... *Hic* ... I—I can’t believe it... How can you treat the MVP this way...?! You were the one who said you’d take responsibility...! You liar...! You heretical demon...!”

Her head was piled high with bumps and lumps and goose eggs of all sizes, and she walked with a peculiar gait, as though her butt was in pain from repeated spankings.

“...Still have room to complain? Seems you haven’t reflected at all. Maybe Olivia ought to give you three more rounds of her full-course punishment hell —”

“I’m sorryyyyyy! I swearrrrrr! I’ve reflected on my actions! *Please don’t make me go through that again!*” she yelped with every fiber of her being, bursting into tears that erupted like fountains.

I sighed in response. As I dealt with this, Lydia came up next to me and lightly pushed my shoulder.

“Cut her some slack. We went through hell, but thanks to Sylphy, we didn’t lose a single comrade.”

“Hmph...”

“When you think about it, isn’t that a miracle? ...Heh, this little sister of mine makes shit interesting with one surprise after another.” Lydia affectionately ran

her fingers through Sylphy's hair.

"H-heh-heh! You're better at reward and punishment than anyone else!"

"...Lydia. You're too easy on her. Don't give way to her idiocy."

"Ha-ha. This much is fine, ain't it?" Lydia let her locks of silver hair be tousled in the wind. "Hey, Sylphy. You—"

The play continued to unfold as I immersed myself in the past, until I turned my attention away from the memories to the present. We had a situation on our hands.

"Uh... Um... Ah..."

The defeat of the Evil God. We were reaching the climax.

Sylphy should have been saying her lines, but all her movements had ground down to a halt. As I watched her, it was apparent she'd forgotten everything she was supposed to say.

The audience was beginning to stir at the sudden pause.

"Sylphy...?" Ireena called to her quietly, but Sylphy could only blink with an alarmed expression.

She was in total panic mode. Her mind appeared completely blank. The guests stared back with confusion. Our classmates backstage stared at her with worry.

All eyes on her. It was backing her into a mental corner, spiraling her further downward in a vicious cycle.

...Geez. She's hopeless. Three years of training and still a handful.

What a dumb *little sister*, this dunce.

"What's wrong, Evil God?! Are you so fearful of me, the Demon Lord, that you've lost your voice?! Hmph! I never realized you were a weak foe!"

Sylphy. If you haven't forgotten...

"Evil God—I accept you are a formidable foe. Have confidence in yourself," I declared.

Or as Lydia had said: *"I accept you, woman. Believe in yourself."*

Remember her words and move. Recall that sunset, when you had your conversation with Lydia:

“You’ve already got it.

“But you’ve got the tendency to overdo it.

“You know, wanting to be useful. Trying to protect everyone. You don’t have to carry that burden.

“Leave that stuff to us. As for you—

““Act without thinking. If you do, I’m sure everything will turn out well.””

I had echoed Lydia’s words, and Sylphy’s eyes grew wide...before she let out a little chuckle.

“As if I’d lose to the likes of youuuuuuuuuuuuu! ” she boomed, moving and acting in a way that was nowhere near the original script.

After that, everything was improvised. Sylphy acted how she pleased, and Ireena and I took cues to follow along.

Just like old times.

The play was absolute chaos, but the audience seemed to enjoy it, showering us with more applause than ever before for our derailed performance.

“Gweh?! I-I’m done for...! B-but I shall be reborn again— Gah. ”

At this point, she was just Sylphy. She wasn’t even acting anymore.

But that didn’t matter. The theater erupted in round after round of applause, cheering on and on and on.

After the play, we stepped foot backstage, where Sylphy approached me. Her face was slightly flushed, and she seemed embarrassed about what she was about to say. I knew she’d stand around forever without even attempting to open her mouth when she got like this. I helped her out.

“Great job, Sylphy. That improv at the end was great.”

“Y-yeah. Thanks... It was all because of you.”

“Not at all. You’re the one who made it happen.”

“...You’re so nice, honestly, unlike him... Well, I guess he was the teensiest bit decent,” she admitted with a gentle smile, looking as though she was reminiscing.

Sylphy looked down. “I caused a lot of trouble for you and Ireena again. I’m really sorry.”

At this solemn apology, the eyes of everyone in the class widened.

Among them, Ireena gave a hoot. “For what? Ard and I had a blast at the end because of you! No trouble at all. In fact, I should be thanking you. Right, Ard?”

“As Ireena said, I had a splendid time. I’m certain the audience felt the same about our play. I attribute its success to you, Sylphy.”

Her bowed head began to tremble... As if unable to face us, she turned away.

“Y-you’re right! I did bring home the glory! W-well, I think I’ll go on patrol for a bit! Phew, I’m swamped with work!” Sylphy sprinted off.

I continued to stare after her.

An open book, as always. I smiled at this thought.





It was twilight, and the school was aglow with the orange tinge of the evening sun as Sylphy strolled around. Her heart was bursting with joy.

Ard Meteor. Ireena Litz de Olhyde. Their faces were etched into her mind.

Particularly Ard Meteor... He made her heart skip a beat... Just as it used to with Lydia.

“...To be nice to me, even though I caused trouble. I never thought I’d meet someone like that again,” she murmured to herself, recalling the events of the play in her mind.

When she had forgotten her lines and panicked, he’d repeated something that Lydia had once said to her. Which would explain why she was projecting Lydia onto him.

But... He would always and forever be Ard—not Lydia.

“Geez. Where did she go? ...If this play gets people buzzing, maybe she’ll hear about it. Maybe...she’ll—”

—*come see me* , Sylphy had been about to say when her eyes caught sight of a woman from behind with swaying silver hair.

“S-Sis...?!” Sylphy’s feet instinctually began to move as she raced toward the woman. “It’s you...! It’s you...! That’s right; she loves festivals...! There’s no way she wouldn’t come to one...to me!”

The corners of her eyes pooled with tears. For three years, she’d wanted to see her again. And these feelings had been particularly strong recently.

There was so much she wanted to tell her.

“Sis!” Sylphy called out to her.

When the woman turned around, Sylphy’s eyes widened at the face before her.

“...? U-um, can I help you?”

It was someone else.

Even though the color of her hair was the exact same, the face in front of her

wasn't Lydia's. A wave of disappointment crushed Sylphy, robbing her of all words and emotion.

As the silence carried on, the silver-haired woman looked at her uneasily and finally left.

"...Ha-ha. I'm so stupid." Her eyes misted slightly, but she exercised restraint.

Looking up at the darkening sky, she spoke quietly to herself.

"I want to see you, Sis..."

CHAPTER 30

The Ex–Demon Lord and the Succubus Girl

With one big event done, the other took its place.

At this rate, the threat from the demons seemed more and more like a fake or bluff. The festival was already on the fifth day. Including this day, there were only two more days of events.

We could only pray everything would pass without incident.

Day Five. Meaning everyone was turning their attention away from the class booths toward the Sword King Battle Tournament, which was apparent from the passionate cheers that ratcheted up a notch and filled the area.

We were reaching the end of the preliminaries on this day—the source of their fever pitch. Each bracket promised to be a high-level battle that decided the top participants for the main event.

Among those in my circle, Ireena, Sylphy, and Olivia had already been chosen to fight in the final battle. And even though I was just brimming with dismay, I chose to advance myself, too.

Which meant the only one left was Ginny.

But as we watched her match from the spectator stands, we could see her opponent was beating her up.

“Ngh...!” she grunted as her blade gritted against the double-edged sword of her opponent.

And her petite body was blasted back as though she was constructed out of paper. Her enemy in this battle possessed strength that was far from the norm as an expert swordfighter whose chances of winning rivaled even Olivia’s. Anyone could see the obvious difference in power... Ginny was already beginning to show her lowered spirits.

...This wasn't good. At this rate, she'd lose. This mentality would squash every last potential for her to win. And I, for many reasons, wanted Ginny to win.

"Ginny! It's too soon to give up! Fight until the very end and never give up hope!" I called out with all my strength.

Did it reach her? Something in Ginny's face changed: Her downtrodden expression switched to a red-hot fighting spirit.

"Graaaaaaah!" Ginny let out a war cry that seared the soul as she charged forward.

She was knocked down, thrown backward, over and over again, but each time, she got back on her feet.

And in the end, as if daunted by her tenacity, her opponent's defense slipped and created an opening.

There was no way she would miss the perfect chance right before her.

"Hyah!" She released a mighty scream, and with the glint of her sword, its tip touched her opponent's jugular.

And with that attack, her opponent lost consciousness.

"A-and score! A complete one-eighty! We have undiscovered talent moving on to the final battle! Ginny Fin de Salvaaaaaaaaaaaaan!"

Paired with the commentator's excitement, the crowd broke into the most thunderous cheer of the day. Ginny was showered in their applause, gazing all around the stadium... As soon as she spotted us, those lovely, cherubic features flashed a captivating smile, and she bowed once.

The Sword King Battle Tournament and the play had been instrumental in advertising our class booth, and business continued to boom at the Erotic Maid Café.

Though initially there had been a huge variance in sales between us and Class A, we'd managed to make a comeback, thanks to our strategy. At this rate, our class was set to exceed Class A's profits, though it would be by only a slight margin.

"Ginny, are you sure? You're the face of our shop. If you step out, won't it

affect sales?” I asked as she walked beside me across the campus swarming with people.

“It’ll be fine. There are plenty of other cute girls. Besides...even if we lose to Class A, Miss Irenea will just have to leave the academy, which isn’t really a loss for me. To be honest, it’s a win either way.” Ginny gave a dark smile and a wicked giggle.

...I’ve been recently thinking that this girl might be seriously evil.

“Well, whatever! Let’s just enjoy our little date at the school festival!” With a bubbly smile, she linked arms with me, which meant I was trapped between her huge rack—daringly exposed in her usual school uniform. I could feel the heat creep up on my face at the sensual softness and sight of them.

With a beautiful girl serving at my side and envious gazes directed my way, I was basically living out a fantasy from my past life about the ideal way to spend time at a school festival. Rife with emotion, I circuited the events and booths with Ginny. All the while, guests and students pointed at her.

“Hey, look! It’s the girl who beat the experienced swordfighter.”

“Seriously? She doesn’t strike me as that good.”

“I can’t believe Ginny’s gonna be in the final tournament.”

“She’s been killing it lately—and seriously stronger than she used to be... Plus, I swear she’s gotten cuter, too...and girlier.”

At every turn, Ginny was greeted by comments in the same vein, looking all proud... Or that’s what you’d expect, but her reaction was the complete opposite.

Traces of girlhood lingered on her charming face, where her lips were pursed and her eyes shadowed by peach hair had clouded over.

“...Hey, Ard. Have I been able to change?” she asked in a tone that even made me worry.

I went to answer...but was interrupted.

“To all on campus! This is an announcement that a beauty contest will be held on a special stage on the western side of campus, sponsored by the third-year

students in Class C. The call for participants is still open, and we welcome contestants and spectators alike to join us there!”

The announcer’s message robbed me of my chance to reply.

“A beauty contest...,” murmured Ginny. She lifted her downcast face to look at me. “Hey, Ard. If I said I wanted to enter the contest, would you burn with jealousy?”

Her voice was a mix of jest and hope, and I had no idea how to reply.

I imagined Ginny at the center of attention with all admiring her figure... And I felt nothing short of joy. If I wanted her all to myself, I guess I would feel a twinge of jealousy, as Ginny had suggested, or that I was being forced to share what was mine.

But Ginny was just a good friend... And at times, we had a student-teacher relationship—and at others, father-daughter.

As I openly shared my feelings without sugarcoating anything, Ginny appeared both joyous and blue. “...I want to enter the beauty contest.”

“Oh, that’s great... I’m on patrol, and I’m afraid I won’t be able to watch you bravely take center stage...”

“N-no, wait! Um, there’s gonna be a bunch of guests at the contest! Which means the demons might target it! You have to guard it! It’s part of your duties!” Ginny frantically latched onto any attempt to persuade me. “...I want you to watch me, Ard. Is that so wrong?”

Who could refuse while she was on the verge of tears?

“...I get it. I’ll burn your performance into my memory, Ginny.”

Well, it wasn’t as if she hadn’t make a convincing point. I knew there would be a big crowd for the contest, and it wasn’t wrong to claim it was part of my duties.

Ginny smiled with glee. “Well, let’s hurry and get going! If we fail to sign up in time, it will all come to naught!”

Her expression was a mix of hope and anxiety, as though her heart was somewhere in between.

The beauty contest. As the name stated, it was an event where their looks would be scrutinized and ranked.

One by one, the participants filed onto the constructed stage on the western side of campus, flashing genial smiles at the audience and making seductive poses to put their looks on display.

“Entry number eight! Melly, age twelve, giving us her stretching doggy pose! How adorable! This is the height of youthful innocence!” The student holding the mic, who was probably a third-year, spoke with excitement.

The emcee was male, as were the judges—and the audience. The stage was caught in the middle of this fervor, as deep voices hooted and hollered at the girls, who were showered with the sexual gazes of lowlife scum. Each contestant had the slightest hint of a smug smile...except for the next one.

Well, it was more like she showed no emotion at all.

“Entry number eighteen! It’s Lilith! She may be wearing a sweet little maid outfit, but this is no cosplay! These are her work clothes! An esteemed live-in maid. Don’t even think about trying to lay a hand on her! It’ll seriously hurt. Seriously!” shouted the emcee in a way that suggested a lengthier backstory.

Lilith twirled around the stage and struck strange poses. Her face held nothing, and she gave off a mysterious impression.

“Whoo-hoo! Lovely Lilly! The cutest in the world! Our lovely, lovely Lil-ith! The greatest beauty, Lil-ith!” boomed a low-pitched voice that stuck out from the rest of the cheers.

...I felt like I’d heard it somewhere before. Accompanying their cheers, the person in question did a strange little dance... Their rotund body jiggled with each step, sending beads of sweat flying off their face. The face on that pasty *manju* ... I was sure I knew it from somewhere.

...It couldn’t be.

A huge question mark sprouted within me. To dispel it, I approached the dancing dumpling.

“Could you possibly be...Elrado?”

“Huh?! Whaddaya want?! Don’t talk to me! Can’t you see I’m busy cheering for Lilith right now—?” He shot me a look of irritation.

“*P-pleeeegh?!* ” He let out a piglike squeal that matched his appearance perfectly.

This basically confirmed to me that he was Elrado.

...Geez. What a wild transformation.

“After our messy duel, I heard you locked yourself away in your dorm... It appears you have let yourself go.”

If I was being blunt, Elrado had reptilian features. To put it nicely, he had a rugged kind of beauty. His entire body was now a bulging blob that held nothing of his original form.

Elrado was dripping with sweat. “I—I—I—I—I won’t do nothing bad! I swear! P-please don’t kill me!”

The incident had apparently traumatized him, as Elrado fearfully put distance between us. Even the way he spoke was different. Coupled with his new look, he was a new person altogether.

“Relax. I came to see my friend in her finest hour. Meeting you here was a complete coincidence.”

“G-gotcha...” He gave a relieved sigh. As he did, Lilith the maid’s turn came to an end, and she exited the stage. “Agh! It’s over?! *Lilly! You’re the beeeeeest!* ” Elrado yelled with his hands to his mouth.

Lilith waved toward us...and gave a small smile. That shift in expression made Elrado break out happily into a grin of his own.

“...Pardon my rudeness, but this is a surprise. To think you would cheer others on... Plus, call out to your maid and actively enjoy her participation.”

“...Everything I showed you guys before was an act. This is my real face. I learned when I was a little brat that being the son of a count meant I could never let others look down on me... That’s why I was volatile... I realize that the old me was stupid,” Elrado mumbled in self-deprecation.

I wondered what circumstances and mental shifts he’d experienced since

we'd last met. I'd never know for sure, but in any case, it was easy to see he wasn't a villainous noble anymore. That was clear.

"Anyway. Your friend. Could that be...?" he trailed off. Her turn was up.

"Well, it's time to continue with entry number nineteen! She's a first-year in Class C! It's Giiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiinny!" he yelled as she stepped onstage.

Ginny looked incredibly sexy in a pink bikini that matched her hair. The sponsors must have provided it... The men in attendance all let out the loudest cheers yet as she lavished her smile on them from the stage and posed suggestively.

There was just something about her that seemed...desperate. *Why are you giving this event your all?* I cocked my head in uncertainty.

"...I see. She's trying to change, too," Elrado murmured quietly as he watched Ginny.

"Trying to change...you say. I'd assumed she already had."

"...Yeah, that's true. I know you've been looking after her. I know you're the reason that she's gotten stronger and gained experience. You can tell from just one look. But...she hasn't overcome her inferiority complex. It's ingrained in her heart...which is pathetic for me to say, as the one who created that problem." Elrado flashed a deprecatingly wry smile, sighing, with obvious regret on his face.

"...Why did you torture Ginny? If this is your real self...you don't seem the type to tyrannize others."

"...You're giving me too much credit. I was nothing more than a little shit. I knew that I was changing her personality by bullying her, but I succumbed to my vices. A hopeless, ugly piece of garbage." With another heavy sigh, Elrado looked into the distance.

"Her family... Ginny's family has served mine for generations. Part of their responsibilities include being our human shields, and for years, they've had the duty of guarding us... Ginny acted as mine since a young age, which is why we were constantly together."

“So you were childhood friends.”

“Yeah. But I wouldn’t call our relationship friendly. From that age, it was drilled into me that as the eldest son of a count, I ought to act like one. *Look down on everyone but the royal family. Never allow anyone to patronize you. See everyone else as ants...* Honestly, it didn’t fit me at all. But my pops was scary. I never had any other choice but to obey him.”

“.....Do you mean to say aristocrats have their own forms of anguish?”

“Yeah. Well, it wasn’t anything terrible. I was stupid and weak of heart and constantly reinventing myself for fear of my parents. That’s all there was to it... At the time, between my personality changes and the pressure from my parents, I was super-stressed. During all that, Ginny became my first underling. When we first met, nothing I made her do ever turned out right... She was trying to protect me, but her clumsiness pissed me off.”

Before he’d realized it, he was attacking her.

As if confessing his sins, Elrado went on. “When I insulted Ginny and tortured her mind and body...I was offered respite from my stress. I knew it was wrong... but I continued to succumb to temptation. To escape my own struggles, I bullied Ginny, drove her into a corner...and in my wake I created that cursed inferiority complex.”

Ginny was all smiles onstage, showing off her voluptuous body and youthful beauty. Her expression was dazzling, but...there was a sense of desperation.

“...As if she’s breaking out of her shell. I shouldn’t be the one to say this, but... I’m relieved.”

“Relieved?”

“Yeah... Day after day, I told myself I had to stop. But I couldn’t, which is why...I’m grateful to you. You beat the living shit out of me and gave me an out—an opportunity for both her and me to change... And it seems she took that in stride. That’s why I’m relieved. Her curse has been lifted—even just a little. At this rate, I’m sure someday...”

“...That’s the case with her. But what about the curse that haunts you? ...Will your guilt and self-loathing ever dissolve?”

“Ha-ha. Not a chance. It’s something I’ll carry for the rest of my life.” With a pained smile, Elrado gazed directly at Ginny and narrowed his eyes—as if she were too bright, too painful to see.

“...I haven’t apologized to her yet. The one from last time doesn’t count. I’ll face her in all sincerity, gravely bow my head...and make up for everything I’ve done with something tangible. Only then will I make amends. Only then...will I finally be free from my curse...” Elrado shook his head, whispering, “It’s no good.

“I’m scared. I’m scared to face her. I wonder how I can at this point... I dunno. There’s an indescribable fear that controls my heart... But I guess you don’t really know much about that.”

“...That is not true at all. I carry burdens of my own.”

Elrado overlapped with my current self. It was terrifying to face your sins. It was scary to face those deserving of your apology.

...I was the very same way. That was why I still hadn’t discussed *that thing* with Sylphy.

“...I assumed you were an annoying guy who was nothing but blessed. I’m surprised to hear you’re suffering, too.” He must have felt a certain kinship because he now looked out with gentle eyes.

However, it lasted for only a moment. His eyes quickly regained their sharp self-loathing as he focused them on Ginny.

“Looks like she’s a shoo-in for the beauty contest. I had planned on being in the audience to send out blessings to Lilly as she held up that winner’s trophy... but I probably shouldn’t hang around,” Elrado mumbled, and then he left...as if trying to escape Ginny’s presence.

He was right. Ginny won the beauty contest, and she was presented with a magnificent trophy.

And now I was walking beside her as she carried it in her arms.

“Hey, it’s that girl. The winner of the beauty contest.”

“No kidding. She’s supercute. Nice rack.”

“Man, I’d love to get with her... That guy next to her can drop dead.”

I was getting mercilessly pierced by jealousy, envy, murderous intent.

Ginny had a relaxed smile. “Oh, I never thought I’d actually win. I guess it means I have some womanly charm?”

“Not *some* , Ginny. You should hold your head high as the winner of the beauty contest. Of course, it’s not just that you possess a beautiful body, but your heart is pure, too. I assure you. Though I doubt that means anything,” I said, smiling jokingly.

Ginny did not return my smile and instead stared at me intently. “Do you truly think so? That I’m pretty, I mean. Do you really think so?”

...Oh. She was wearing this same expression onstage for the beauty content.

The cursed sense of inferiority that gnawed at her heart was rising to the surface.

...Honestly, I didn’t think there was much I could do. In the end, this was something she had to solve for herself.

But even then, I hoped my words could save her. I gazed at Ginny earnestly.

“You are beautiful, Ginny. Have confidence in yourself.”

I’d intended it to be short and sweet.

I wondered if my sentiment had reached her. Her eyes were unfocused for a moment...

But her gentle smile eventually appeared. “Thank you. I think I’ve come to like myself just a little bit more.”

Was I supposed to take this optimism as a sign that her curse was starting to lift?

If that was the case, I was sure there would come a time when Elrado would be able to smile again, too.

I couldn’t help but hope for that day to arrive...



The fifth day of the school festival was drawing to a close. The sky darkened,

and the guests were thinning out.

Nevertheless...the Erotic Maid Café was still buzzing with business. It was near closing time, but customers eagerly remained in their place in line.

A group of boys from Class A watched from afar.

“Hey, what do we do? We’ll lose if this keeps up,” one of the students said to the class head, who had been designated as their leader.

“I can’t believe their ads were this effective...!”

“If we lose, we’ll have to prostrate ourselves...! I’m already pissed we have to deal with the daughter of a baron, Ireena. But to bow our heads before commoners from who knows where...!”

While everyone else present was already feeling their defeat, their leader gave a grievous sigh. “We’ve still got a backup plan, right? One to guarantee our victory.”

“Wh-what is it?”

Can’t you guess? What an unimaginative group, he derided internally as he shared his thoughts.

“I—I see. Yeah, if we can do that...!”

“We’ll win, but...isn’t that unfair?”

“Ha. You’re saying that now? Might makes right. Yeah?”

None opposed him.

Using the cover of darkness to their advantage, they began to put this plan into place.

CHAPTER 31

The Ex-Demon Lord Keeping the Cheaters at Bay

Two days of the festival remained.

Over its course, there had been one situation cropping up on campus after another...and the one who left the deepest impact was Sylphy, the transfer student who'd burst into our lives with the energy of a storm, wreaking havoc everywhere she went.

Now that I thought about it, a majority of the festival seemed to involve handling the heaping mountain of complaints.

Olivia repeatedly ordered her to wait on standby, but Sylphy's sense of justice was so strong that she ignored all instructions and went out on patrol almost every day. She wrought chaos and destruction throughout the school.

Which brought us here. I was diligent in making patrol rounds as well as a round of apologies.

I set off for the shops where that fool had caused trouble and bowed my head to each and every one. It reminded me of the old days. In my past life, I had constantly been bowing my head and taking responsibility for both Sylphy's and Lydia's mistakes... I bet this generation would never imagine that: the Demon Lord, prostrating himself before commoners in all sincerity.

...That aside. As I went around expressing my apologies, there were those who called out to me—among them were those seething with animosity, but most were friendly.

"Please do your best at the Sword King Battle Tournament! I'm rooting for you!"

"Thanks for your advice earlier! Our business is booming now!"

Awash with their warm voices, I realized something. I was now a part of their

circle.

That hadn't been the case in the ancient world, where I had been known everywhere as the Demon Lord. By the time my journey to slay the Evil Gods was nearing its end stages, I had become a legend...which meant I couldn't form any friendships because everyone was shaking in their boots over me.

I still remember when I tried to join in with some rank and file soldiers who were just shooting the breeze...

"Aaaah?! Aren't you the D-D-D-D-Demon Lord?!"

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-what brings you here?!"

"No need to be nervous. I just—"

"G... GUURGH."

"Oh no! Daniel threw up from his nerves— GUURGH!"

...They'd all been so terrified of me that they hurled when they saw me. That made it more than a little difficult to hold a conversation.

If anything, if they could throw up at the sight of someone, didn't that make them the daring ones?

This all led me to hide my title of Demon Lord when I had been enrolled at the academy. But that didn't change anything.

"U-um. The school festival is coming up. Would you be interested in—?"

"What? Who the hell are you?"

"Well, we're in the same class—"

"Doesn't ring any bells. Leave me alone, creeper. Kkkkkkkkr... PLEGH." The student had spat a glob of saliva at me instead of hurling up their last meal.

I wanted to die.

These agonizing days had just kept piling up. And at the end of it all, I had chosen an out with reincarnation...

And I was so glad that I made this choice. To be given another chance to connect with others.

I was basking in my good fortune as I waltzed around campus to deliver my apologies, which obviously caused others to berate me: “What the hell are you smirking for? Are you even sorry?” But I couldn’t care less. I was the happiest I’d ever been.

“A-Ard! W-we have a problem!”

I was on cloud nine when Ginny’s shrill voice called out to me. I could hear the stress and anxiety in her scream, and the joviality in my heart turned to strain.

“...What’s the matter? Is there an issue?”

“I-I’ll explain the details later! Just hurry!”

It must have been urgent. Ginny yanked my arm as I raced through the school.

Had the demons made their move? No, that would have set off a magical reaction. I didn’t get the sense that the school was under attack, either. What in the world had Ginny this worked up...?

It seemed we’d arrived at the scene when I was mid-thought. Ginny stopped pulling me and came to a halt.

And our destination was our class booth, the Erotic Maid Café. Ginny walked right in, making a beeline toward the kitchen. I followed right behind her...and a terrible scene filled my line of sight.

Strewn across the floor were vegetables, crushed into smithereens.

And on the kitchen table lined charred clumps of meat and fish. Who—what—when—where—*how* could this be happening?

And at the very center of this disastrous culinary scene...

“*Waaaah!* I’m so sorry! This wasn’t supposed to happen!” wailed Ireena, plopped down on the floor, sobbing in gushing streams.

Our classmates gathered around and looked upon the calamity as if the end of the world was upon them.

“...No, really. What exactly is going on here?”

This was when Ginny finally offered me an explanation. “Class A did their

worst yet...! Look at this.” She pointed to a wooden crate... Inside were mashed up vegetables.

But it wasn’t only those ingredients that had been laid to waste.

All the meat was covered in snow-white film. Mold, huh. This had to be magic.

As for the seafood, it was in the same state as the vegetables—completely obliterated, including our featured dish, the fin of a cat shark. There wasn’t a shadow of their former beauty or appeal. What was more, old water from the well at our academy had been dumped on our flour, which had made it clump together and turn an unappetizing shade of yellow.

“As you can see, our ingredients are ruined. Miss Ireena tried to insist operations could resume to encourage us... This all started when she held out that we could use the crushed vegetables... And now we’re here with another mess.” Ginny cast her eyes at Ireena in her weepy state and sighed. “Because her cooking skills are destructive levels of awful.”

...Ah, so that’s what’s going on.

“None of us could believe it. To be able to ruin every last ingredient... It almost made me wonder if it was intentional, you know... In a way, she’s a genius. Not anyone can take our best ingredients and make them worse than... trash,” Ginny ranted with obvious contempt. Her gaze toward Ireena sharpened somewhat.

“...Anyway. We’re running on empty. By Miss Ireena’s hand, we’ve essentially lost everything...with nothing to serve in the shop.”

“Hmm. That’s a predicament. Our selling point is being able to interact with the girls, but that isn’t enough on its own. We’ve been able to turn a profit because this experience is paired with good food.”

“That’s right. At this rate, our customers will dwindle, and...Class A will be declared the winners by a narrow margin.

Don’t you have a plan to get us out of this mess? I was getting this vibe from not just Ginny. Taking a cursory glance at the faces of all the students was enough to tell me they were on the same page.

Sylphy approached Ireena. “I-it’s okay! It’s all about cooking with love, right?! See? Even this raw garbage can be a proper meal!”

“R-raw garba...?! ”

“It’s fine—as long as it’s packed with love! That’s what cooking is all about! Add love, and the ugliest, foulest dish becomes okay!”

“Th-the ugliest, foulest...?! *W-waaaaaaah!* ”

I guessed that idiot was trying to cheer her up, but there really was no fixing stupid.

Sylphy became all flustered—with no awareness that she’d been the one to deal Ireena the finishing blow. Finally, she seemed to hit on something and clapped her hands together.

“I-I’ve got it! We’ll have the other booths share their ingredients with us!”

At this, the students collectively went “Ah!” This was a school with prestige. Even the commoners came from important families, not to mention the aristocrats. This was why they were unconsciously deterred from anything that might sacrifice their dignity and give others the chance to disrespect them.

“It’s true! If we could just borrow ingredients from the other classes...!”

“B-but our pride...”

“We don’t have time for that now! The Excellency Award is just within our reach! Compared to its glory, a little groveling is nothing!”

According to the majority rule, we would plead with the other classes to lend us some ingredients...but there was one little problem.

“No way! We ain’t giving you guys a damn thing!”

Every class refused us point-blank.

The reason? “Sylphy made it a living hell for us! Who would wanna cooperate with her class?!”

They were a united front.

They hated her and wanted nothing to do with her—or her class.

This was a lot for even her to deal with.

“Y-you guys... I—I...,” she stuttered, a sweaty mess, looking at the floor with a clouded expression.

All eyes were trained on Sylphy.

But...no one blamed her—not the commoners nor even the nobles who were rabid for glory.

They understood she wasn’t just a troublemaker. After all, they’d interacted with her enough to know she was a kind girl who always acted for others’ sakes.

“...Well, I guess there’s not much we can do now.”

“Right. Too bad we won’t get first place.”

In fact, most of the students were very considerate of her feelings.

“B-but...! I-if we lose...it’ll be my fault, Sis...!”

There was no question that Ireena, who had been tossed into this conversation, would ever blame Sylphy. She simply gave a troubled smile and quietly said, “It’s all right.”

...I’m sure it would have been better for Sylphy to be backed into a corner. Her eyelashes were soaked with tears of guilt.

...Geez. What a pain of a little sister.

“Sylphy, have you forgotten our little plan?” I asked.

Her tears stopped. “O-our plan...?”

“Oh, did it slip your mind? Didn’t you tell me you have countermeasures set in place?” I smiled as she tilted her head in bewilderment. “If you’ve forgotten, allow me to remedy the situation for you.”

Everyone looked at me blankly.

...Relax, Sylphy. I’ll be the one to protect your new home.



The sixth day of the festival was nearing sunset, beckoning the moment that would spell victory or defeat.

In the backroom of Year 1, Class A's shop, the Bikini Girls Café, the leader was smoking puffs of tobacco from a pipe, enjoying their idle chat.

"Our sales are slated to be the highest in school history. In other words..."

"The Excellency Award is in the bag, and that eyesore of a daughter from a baron is old news."

They all laughed raucously. As they saw it, this competition had been about Irenea the entire time. The main cause had been Sylphy, but the aristocrats couldn't care less about the fate of a commoner. You see, the nobility was only interested in those of their own class.

To them, Irenea and her family were a blemish to their class. They were just barons, the lowest rank in their social hierarchy, and managed to be praised as heroes. On top of it all, they had enough say and influence as a count.

These middle-ranking noble students couldn't stand this preferential treatment.

"If the daughter of the Heroic Baron disappears...we'll naturally be the group with the most power out of the first-year students. Plus, that son of a count, Elrado, is as good as expelled from this academy."

"Right. But...what about that other commoner?"

"Ard Meteor? He's annoying, too, but he's just a commoner. He can't even *touch* us."

To the class leader, Ard Meteor was a random old villager with some skill in magic. Once a commoner, always a commoner. As aristocrats, they were just cut from a different cloth—of a higher quality. He had no reason to fear this character or pay him any mind. Their society wasn't so kind that it would accept him on strength alone.

"Haaah... Aren't you getting bored of sitting around and chatting? I've got a fun idea."

"Yeah? Let's hear it."

"Let's check out the booth at Class C as customers. I mean, we're already going to win, so why don't we show a little mercy by giving the losers a slight

boost in sales? Ironical, right?”

“Ha-ha. Great. I can’t wait to see the looks on their faces.”

With all in agreement, they got up to leave their own booth and headed toward the Erotic Maid Café.

There was no line in front. The festival was entering its final stages, and it was impossible to keep business thriving at this point. Class A was in the same boat.

“Well, let’s see what’s going on inside.”

“I bet there’s no one else around.”

“If that’s true, I’m gonna laugh my ass off.”

Smirking, the group stepped foot in the booth, where an unexpected scene jumped out at them. The inside of the shop was thrumming with activity, doing obviously better than their own...

“““Welcome home, Masters!”””” greeted girls in sensual pseudo-maid outfits, mobbing the boys as they stood stock-still.

They swore the girls’ gazes looked almost triumphant.

The class leader opened his mouth, ready to tell them off.

“Thank you for joining us today.” A well-projected, elegant voice flooded his ears.

It was Ard Meteor, flashing a calm smile. “All the way from Class A. We’ve prepared accommodations for you. Right this way.”

As if they’d been anticipating their arrival. There was something off about it. The boys were all in agreement there.

In any case, it wasn’t like they could hang around the entrance. They followed Ard to a corner of the shop and sat down as a maid brought them menus.

“...What the heck is this?”

From edge to edge, the menu listed off unfamiliar dishes.

Strange. This was totally different from the one that they’d investigated.

“Tch...! Just throw something together!”

If they asked for an explanation of the dishes, they might as well have confessed their own ignorance. Following Ard's lead, everyone at the table ordered...something thrown together. As they waited for the food to arrive, they exchanged glances.

"Hey, this is pretty weird."

"Wh-why is it so busy? The ingredients are—"

"Shh! We're in the middle of enemy territory. Don't say anything stupid!"

"W-well, I guess there's no problem. Even if they're playing a little trick on us —"

Their food arrived one by one. Of course, since the main draw of this booth was the girls, each dish came with all kinds of extra services. But sex appeal just wouldn't cut it for the class leader and his group.

They were already familiar with the touch of a woman and long past the point of making a rookie move by giving into carnal desire. The group had enough experience to scorn their hospitality...

Which wasn't the case when it came to the food.

"The flavor of this steak...! It's extraordinary...!"

"I thought you were playing it up with a name like golden pilaf...but...this dish shines and sparkles...! And it's divine...!"

"This ramen or whatever has the look of pasta soup...but the texture of the noodles and the flavor...! I've never experienced anything like it...!"

They might have intended to snub Class C, but they couldn't bring themselves to smack-talk the food. It would be as good as admitting that they didn't have refined taste...

Seeing them grind their teeth in frustration, Ard Meteor broke into a brilliant smile. "The ingredients for this meal have been provided by patrons *brimming with kindness*."

A jolt went up their spines. *No...way...!*

"Do you know about dry aging? You can boost the flavor and richness of meat

by dehydrating them. Especially...the matured variety covered in white mold, which is known as aged beef. Its flavor is considered a fresh departure from your standard fare.”

Mold. Isn't that part of our plans for sabotage?

“Of course, we promise complete sanitation when handling all food products... To continue, the golden pilaf—made from a fin of a cat shark that a kind spirit mashed up for us. We used it to complement the presentation and taste of the rice. The flavor speaks for itself, but the golden sparkle of the shark fin is as lovely as a gem. Don't you agree?”

They didn't know what to say. This...could only mean one thing.

“And the ramen. This is another ingredient that a friendly stranger generously soaked with old water. The well at the academy must have contained lye, which, incidentally, is very alkaline. Mixing and kneading the water with this flour resulted in noodles that hold a unique flavor.”

These guys used every scheme to their advantage...!

“Wow. To think this world has people with this much consideration. Words can't describe my gratitude. Thanks to them, we've weathered through to the end of the school festival...and earned the Excellency Award.” Ard formed a gentle smile.

It was serene, but beyond this expression, the class leader could sense the fearsomeness of a demon. Everyone else had latched onto some off-base thoughts: *We totally screwed up* and *What rotten luck*.

They were wrong. Sure, they'd been dealt misfortune, but they should have been redirecting their concerns to this boy, this Ard Meteor, his knowledge and tact.

Aged meat? Lye in the water? The class leader had never heard of such a thing. If there was mold on meat or water in flour, any normal person would find them unusable. But this boy overcame these obstacles with knowledge that no one else possessed.

As for the shark fin, he had put a fresh twist on it and transformed it into a new featured dish on the menu. Any other would have seen it pulverized,

evaluated it as worthless, and disposed of it. But this boy...!

I underestimated him as a commoner, but it may be time for me to recalibrate my assumptions.

I don't need to get rid of Ireena—but Ard Meteor...! It's you...!

He imagined this commoner would be the one to eventually intrude upon the noble realm. With this premonition in mind, the class leader glared at Ard Meteor.

I'll admit defeat this time. But...consider this win as the beginning of your end.

He was ravished on the inside with hostility... But it was as though Ard could see right through him.

A bead of sweat trickled down the class leader's cheek.

CHAPTER 32

The Ex–Demon Lord and the Excellency Award

To get us through the situation, I relied on the knowledge passed to me from my former subordinates. There was a handful of them who had claimed to come from another world, and they saved our butts in this situation. For that, I was grateful.

...Those from another world were from a country called “Ja-pan.”

Weren’t there other countries in their world? To make things stranger, they spoke only of the knowledge of their own nation and never mentioned any others. I didn’t have much interest in other worlds at the time, which is why I didn’t bother asking, but...

Now looking back on it, I thought it odd. If I ever have a chance to meet someone from there, I might just ask them more about their world.

That, however, was for another time.

After we’d managed to turn the destruction at the hands of Class A into an advantage, we approached the end of the sixth day of the school festival. Our booths were to be dismantled on this day. In a sense, you could say the festival was over.

When that was done, a school-wide announcement ordered all students to wait on standby. From this point on, each of the booth’s sales would be calculated to determine the top-scoring class...the recipient of the Excellency Award.

It was apparently time for results to be tallied. Another announcement directed us to gather in the assembly hall, and we set off with our hopes and fears.

The mass of students were cramped up inside, waiting in anticipation for our

headmaster, Count Golde, to speak onstage. There was a satisfied smile on his wrinkled face.

“Congratulations for making it through. For the past six days, I’m sure that you’ve all experienced an array of hardships that will become assets in your future. I hope you will not forget what this festival and the preparations leading up to it have cultivated,” he blabbed, going through the motions of delivering the usual preamble as an instructor.

“Well! Without further ado, let us reveal the class to receive the Excellency Award! There isn’t anything tangible that you win! But your name will be carved into our school’s history to be passed down into antiquity!”

There was no actual prize, but rather an award of honor. There are times and circumstances where that’s better. With the prestige to back up this school, it had promise to offer a higher standing once we moved into society.

And the class to receive that honor was—

“Year 1, Class C! The latest to strike a new record for the most sales in school history and the winners of this year’s Excellency Award!”

Our classmates broke into an excited frenzy.

“All riiiiiiiiiiiiight!”

“Hmph. We gave everything we had. Of course.”

“Twists and turns along the way, but...Sylphy’s idea was our ace in the hole!”

Sylphy scratched her cheek in embarrassment as everyone directed their beams at her. She had been the target of criticism only a short while ago, but now she was being extolled as the class hero. I had made sure our saving throw was Sylphy’s suggestion. As a result, she was the one who rescued everyone in their darkest hour...and protected this school—the place where she now belonged.

That had meant being the man behind the curtain, but I didn’t regret it in the least. Instead, my heart was filled with relief.

...Geez. A pain until the very end.

“Well, that about concludes our assembly. The school festival is essentially

over...but we still have the Sword King Battle Tournament tomorrow. Please enjoy the festivities until the very end.”

And with this, the students exited the assembly hall.

It was here that, with Sylphy and her followers in tow, Ireena headed toward them—Class A.

“We’re the winners! Well, go on and grovel like you promised!”

“Ngh...!” The students of Class A gritted through their teeth at Ireena.

Before I knew what was going on, the rest of our classmates had surrounded the group, shooting looks that could kill. It was clear they held a grudge about their sabotage, eager for a chance to relieve them from their anger.

At the same time, the students of Class A directed all responsibility to their representative—the class leader and his followers. Everyone else excused themselves, insisting that they had nothing to do with it and quickly scampering off. Now alone and helpless, the core group glowered at Ireena and our class for a moment before breaking out into defiant smiles.

“I don’t remember making that promise,” he sneered, lying through his teeth without remorse.

Well, it was just about as much as Ireena and everyone else had anticipated, but it didn’t mean they’d accept it.

“What?! You think we’ll just let you get away that easily?!”

“Ireena’s right! On your knees, now!”

“You cheaters tried to totally sabotage us!”

Even under the deluge of booing, the class leader and his followers shrugged with indifference. “I don’t see why you’re all getting so upset. Sabotage? What slander. We would never play dirty. Unless...you have evidence? To prove us guilty of any wrongdoing, that is.”

We could only fall silent. They had moved cleverly without leaving a single shred of evidence to get them. I had to hand it to them. That was pretty amazing.

“Well. If you’ll excuse us, I believe we’re done here.”

They turned away to leave, but before they could get away from the scene...

A woman approached us. The headmaster’s private secretary.

“You’re free to go, but if you leave, you’ll be expelled from the academy,” she called out, glasses glinting against the light.

The group swiveled in shock to face her.

“E-expelled?! What do you mean?!”

“Exactly that. You cannot possibly say you have no clue? You’ve broken the school rules. I know you were all warned not to abuse your family connections, which you did with no remorse.”

“Y-you can’t prove that—”

“As for proof, we have plenty. Did you think children could pull the wool over the eyes of adults? ...And even if we had no evidence, you still would have no choice but to obey us. I know you understand who is on higher ground, don’t you?”

Her smile rich with sadism made the boys of Class A break into a cold sweat.

“I mean, of course, we know about the discord between the two classes. Upon reporting this incident of unfairness to the headmaster...he was hooting and hollering at your ability to score the second-highest sales in academy history—even if you did cheat. We’ll overlook everything if you prostrate yourselves before Class C. Otherwise, you will be removed from the academy. That is our verdict.”

With cold eyes, the secretary presented them with their options: “Grovel or have your personal records stained. The choice is yours.”

“N-ngh...!” Starting with the class leader, each member of the group gave a look of anguish.

“*Dammiiiiit!* ” roared their leader, falling to his knees...and pressing his hands and forehead against the floor.

Following suit, his coconspirators fell into place, crawling on the ground in

apology for torturing us with their foul methods.

Witnessing this scene seemed to satisfy my classmates.

“Heh! Serves you right!”

“Hee-hee-hee...! The eldest son of a count groveling...! I’ll never forget this for as long as I live...!”

“Ho-ho-ho-ho! I’ll be sleeping good tonight!”

At the spectacle before them, commoner and noble alike chuckled. I guess these boys from Class A deserved our gratitude for bringing them all together.

“...Just you wait, Ard Meteor...!”

For some reason, the class leader turned his full animosity on me. I couldn’t keep track of each and every person who hated me, which is why I decided to pay it no mind.

And thus, our dispute drew to a close.

Afterward, Ireena, Sylphy, Ginny, and I returned home to the dorms, and as had been decided beforehand, we threw a little after-party. We all gathered around the table, each with a glass of wine in hand.

“Well, let’s toast to celebrate our victory... Cheers.”

““““Cheers!””””

At my toast, everyone clinked glasses in a satisfying clank and downed their drink in a single gulp. Wow, post-victory wine was delicious. Afterward, we chatted as we all snacked to our hearts’ content, opened up a new bottle, and did whatever we pleased—which apparently was to praise me.

“Ah... We would have lost if it wasn’t for you.”

“True! That’s my Ard for you! A class hero!”

“I’m delighted by your adulations. But...this victory wasn’t my doing. We couldn’t have done it without everyone’s participation. It’s about a month in coming, but I would like to thank you three for all your efforts.” I offered my appreciation with a smile.

Sylphy looked straight at me and spoke up, her face flushed pink. “H-hey, Ard.

I misunderstood you. I thought you were the reincarnation of the Demon Lord... but I guess I was wrong. After all, you're really kind, really dependable...a-and cool!"

...Sylphy. You're saying the Demon Lord was unkind, undependable, and uncool? I'm going to clock you if you don't watch it.

I wasn't happy to receive this compliment at all.

As for Sylphy, she didn't seem to have the faintest clue about my feelings as her face turned redder. "I really caused you a lot of trouble this time around. I'm always making the situation worse...but you back me up without complaint."

"As classmates, that's only natural. It's nothing to be worked up over, Sylphy."

If this were the past, I would have said something like *Damn idiot, you're such a pain in the ass* and given her a good whooping. But if I did that now, I would admit that I was the Demon Lord, so I decided to stiffly endure it and act with graciousness.

Her eyes cast downward as she hung her head in apology. "I took away your achievements at the end... I'm really sorry. But...thanks to you, I've avoided losing something precious."

As she continued to blush, her lips trembled as she took a deep breath.

"Th-thank you, Ard Meteor!" she shouted bashfully before turning her head away as if unable to look at me anymore. "I-I'm going to the bathroom!"

She sprinted out of the room.

"...Oh, she's got it bad. Well, I suppose I don't see any problem with that," Ginny murmured as she eyed the door.

"Got it bad? What's that supposed to mean?" asked Ireena.

"Exactly what you think it does. Miss Sylphy is in love with Ard."

"Wha—?!" Ireena bumbled, lips pursed and eyes wide.

...In love with me?

No. Please don't. I don't even want to imagine it.

“Hmm. I can’t say I particularly like Miss Sylphy...but she might do well in the harem. She has a little-sister quality about her. And that’s exactly the type of girl that’s missing from the girls that I’ve scouted,” Ginny mumbled to herself, then looked at me with sparkling eyes.

“I’m certain she will confess soon! To prepare, you should think about how to answer!”

“Ah, no... Ha-ha... Give me a break...”

I’d never laughed with so much pain in my life.

“...I’m back.”

Having finished her business, Sylphy returned to the room.

“W-w-w-w-welcome back! Wow, that was fast!”

“...Yeah.”

As if bothered by her conversation with Ginny, Ireena had begun acting strangely.

Well, speaking of strange... There was something off about Sylphy, too. Or maybe I was also being led astray by this conversation.

Hmm. I can feel Sylphy stealing glances my way...

...If it turned out she really was in love with me, I wouldn’t be able to answer those feelings. I just didn’t have it in me.

And when she confesses? If that moment did come, it would be the time to tell all. To confess my sins and reveal how unqualified I was to receive her affections.

...I couldn’t help but wish that it would never come.

I was just like Elrado, who couldn’t face Ginny.

I wanted to avert my eyes from this matter alone.

CHAPTER 33

The Ex-Demon Lord Versus...

After running its course for an entire week, the school festival had come to its final day.

Before anything else, the morning was spent breaking down booths and shops, but then came the final event that would last from afternoon until evening.

The Sword King Battle Tournament.

Once the shops were confirmed to be put away, the guests were invited to enter the stadium...

Back to the present. The seats of the arena swelled with guests, and their fevered excitement was hot enough to reach the heavens, which I was observing from the waiting room on the crystal projector with Ireena and the other participants.

I was accustomed to being on large stages, so I didn't feel especially nervous. However, Ireena and Ginny were another story. As held by a constant sense of urgency, they hadn't let out as much as a peep in some time. The other combatants, including Olivia, hadn't either...

The most surprising part was that even Sylphy was crossing her arms in silence. She always got hyped up at huge festivals, dragging me into her messes...

I knew it. She'd been acting weird since the night before.

Sylphy glared at the scene reflected in the crystal, where the participants of the first match would be announced.

The main tournament had an element of surprise: The matches were all chosen at random. A large crystal floated in the sky at the center of the arena as

the names of participants whirled around...before it came to a stop at two names.

The first match would be between Sylphy and an outsider.

“D-do your best!”

“Well, it’s not as if I won’t cheer you on.”

Ireena and Ginny encouraged.

Sylphy just replied: “...Right.”

With not the slightest smile or expression, she left the room with her opponent.

“Something’s off with that girl.”

“Well, she’s got a lot on her mind...thinking about the right time to confess to Ard. I wonder if she can win the match in her state?”

I had to agree that she was rife with worry. Sylphy’s mind was stuck on something.

The way she engaged in her match...was nothing like her.

She was too cold, too silent. I’d never seen her fight that way.

It ended in her dominating victory. It was no question there had been an excessive difference in ability, but her calm movements were steadfast and unbreachable that you couldn’t help but feel sorry for her opponent.

“S-Sylphy is amazing. Like a totally different person.”

“I can feel her fighting spirit... I wonder if she’s got the most cliché situation in her mind—confessing her feelings when she’s become the victor.”

I set Ginny’s comment aside. As Ireena had said, Sylphy was a completely different person. Even after she returned to the waiting room, she didn’t seem the least bit cheery. You couldn’t even tell where she was looking with her blank eyes. This attitude had even Olivia perplexed.

What in the world was going on with her? It couldn’t actually be lovesickness, could it? I mulled this over, churning with ideas.

“The first battle has been decided by an overwhelming power gap! How will the next match unfold? Stop the roulette!”

The names of the next fighters were displayed on the screen.

“Oh? Oh? Ohhhh?! In the second match, we’ve got some big names heeeere!”

My mind went blank, throwing all questions about Sylphy out the window, because the combatants were...

“The Legendary Apostle, Lady Olivia, and—the son of the Great Mages who has been making waves, Ard Meteor! A living legend and the top rookie are about to duke it ouuuuuut!”

The place was ready to boil over in excitement. My dour mood, on the other hand, fell below freezing.

“A clash between a genius and a legend...!”

“I wanted to go up against the two of them... Oh well, what can you do?”

“The kid seems good at magic...but let’s see if his swordsmanship can keep up with Lady Olivia.”

The participants were revved up, including Ireena and Ginny.

“Give it your best shot, Ard! I’m sure you’ll be fine! You can take on Lady Olivia!”

“I’m certain the sight of your surprise victory will be burned into my eyes!”

My opponent’s black cat ears and tail fur bristled as a wondrous smile broke across her lovely features. She fixated on me. “Your desired end showed up early, didn’t it? Riiight, Ard?”

The look on her face was amicable and spirited...but the thoughts swirling around inside that mind were the exact opposite.

She wanted to clear things up with this battle, and depending on the situation...treat me to a full-course beating from hell, all to her heart’s content. I knew that’s what she was thinking, and it made me sweat buckets.

“Would both participants make their way to the arena?” asked an attendant who’d entered the room.

...How long has it been since I've last wanted to book it for good?

Olivia and I stood side by side and set out. As we inched closer and closer to the moment that we would duke it out, my mind spiraled out of control, trying desperately to find an out.

...I didn't think the worst-case scenario would happen.

I'd wanted to go up against Ireena or Ginny, go easy on them to the extent that they wouldn't find out, and hand over the victory. But Olivia? It would be hard to fake it without her catching on...!

At any rate, I had to get through it.

I didn't want to bear the full brunt of a punishment from my big sister. No joke, she would obliterate my psyche. And I'd wanted to savor more days of entertaining fun on campus with Ireena and the others. Which meant that I would pretend to give everything I had in a tight match and intentionally lose without anyone catching on. This way, I could dispel any of her suspicions that I was the Demon Lord.

With my mind decided and determined, I tightened my grip on the blunt sword I'd been provided, and Olivia and I faced each other in the center of the arena.

"A— A petrifying glaring contest! I can feel their extraordinary fighting spirits emanating off them... From the moment they stepped onstage, I've been the only one letting out a peep as everyone else has held their breath...!"

I'd hold back. That said, I would have to engage in serious combat to a certain degree so she wouldn't get tipped off—hence, why I was projecting bloodlust.

Not that I had the slightest ounce of real willpower in me.

"Ah, how nostalgic... Your energy is just like *his* ."

"...I'm honored by your praise."

We exchanged a few short words.

And right when we were signaled to begin: "It's been a while since we played around, *you stupid little brother* ," snapped Olivia, releasing a rabid rage that I could feel from her entire body.

In the blink of an eye, she closed the distance between us.

A glint of light. It pierced down to form a vertical line aiming for the top of my head—splitting into a hundred more sparks, starting from my head and going down toward my fingertips, upper and lower arms, torso, gut, thighs. She was intently focused on getting every last one of my vital areas.

Olivia called this move Momentary Long Sword: Full Set, and it unleashed countless slash attacks in a second.

I was familiar with her skills, of course, and it would be easy to dodge them... But I figured I'd intentionally take one out of every ten hits.

“Gweh!”

Geez, that hurt. It fractured the bones in my body in ten places—including my skull. But if that was what I needed to do, so be it. If I could outstep every last one, I would be outing myself as the Demon Lord.

All of this meant I had to receive some of her blows...and let loose some of my own.

“Tsssh!” I exhaled sharply through my teeth, swinging my blade with both hands.

Ripping through the air with my sword, I drew a half circle and slashed with all my might.

“Too slow.”

As I missed my target, I was blasted to the side with a counterattack that sent me flying to the edge of the arena.

“...Huh? Wh-what just happened?! I-it all happened so fast, I can't even...! I just... Lady Olivia moved in, and Ard was sent flying...! Would I be wrong in saying that this match is in Lady Olivia's favor?!”

You could count on two hands the number of people who understood that last hit. For that reason, the audience was astounded by us—naturally by Olivia's advantage...and even some praise for me.

Be that as it may, I couldn't care less about their reaction. Olivia (and her face) came first.

...Her smile's clouded over the teeniest bit. Perfect!

This proves she's having doubts! If I keep this up, I can trick her and totally lose!

Burning with the motivation to give up this battle, I sighed deeply. "You aren't called the Sword God for nothing. But I'm afraid to tell you... It's too early for you to judge my abilities."

I dropped a dumb, cliché line to appear appropriately riled up. Then it was my turn to make a move.

I made a few suitably lazy slashes in her direction...and randomly defended in a way that was befitting of my plan before sending one blow toward Olivia's face.

A thin red line trickled down her cheek, staining her pale skin.

"Whoa! L-Lady Olivia is—! The Living Legend is—! She's bleeding! What?! How?! Ard Meteor, age fifteen! Are you telling me he's gotten within range of the Legennnnnd?!"

The stadium roared. It was all going according to plan.

I mean, think about it. It would have been super-suspicious if I'd lost without making any hits, right? And I knew what this situation would bring...

"...Interesting," muttered Olivia.

One hit was guaranteed to rile her up enough to ratchet things up a notch, since she was the type to bring the heat. As a matter of fact, her aura was more murderous than before...

"Don't die on me," she spat coldly—and unveiled a frigidly inexpressive look.

And with that, her aggressive offense began.

Before even a second could pass, Olivia had managed to kick it up another level—a deluge of flurried attacks that passed a hundred million, or a trillion.

She was out with an absolute intent to kill. Up against those fierce attacks, I gave a look of anguish and pretended to be on full defense.

All right. All I had to do was land a few sloppy, relatively safe hits and let

myself be blown away. After that, if I legit lost consciousness, my job would be done.

Me? I wasn't a great actor. But our rehearsals might have upped my skills because Olivia seemed to be totally buying it. No problems at all in the foreseeable future.

In the beginning, she'd been piss-your-pants scary, but I guess it was nothing now.

Ha-ha. How simple, this big sister of mine.

.....Okay. This is where I let her go for the jugular. It'll definitely make me faint, but there's little chance of dying. The perfect attack.

Olivia's sword came right at me. Time stretched and stretched into forever, and her movements were in slow motion— As I impatiently waited for the tip of her sword to jab my throat...

"Hey, Ard."

As we faced each other, Olivia's face—

"Y'know, battle arenas..."

Olivia's face was more glorious than ever before.

"...ain't a great place for acting."

Her smile became beyond beautiful.

Her expression, casual address, rough speech.

As I tooled it all in, I understood: *Ah, I've failed.*

I hadn't fooled Olivia at all. She'd only been pretending, waiting to see what I'd do. All the while believing I was the Demon Lord.

As this realization dawned on me, the tip of her drawn sword moved— changing its trajectory. It was nothing like her tepid attacks from before. It was a single attack intended to slice my neck in two.

I've told you a million times that I hate when opponents go easy on me. Die, you damn fool , her gaze seemed to tell me.

Whether I willed it or not, this impending sword of death had me worried.

But when I realized it, I had unconsciously cast a magic circle—a defensive mechanism, *Reflect Wall* . A modified version of the mid-level *Mega Wall* surrounded my entire body with a translucent barrier—

Within a few seconds, I'd return the force of that direct physical attack right back at her. Her sword had me right at the neck, but my magic would reduce that force to zero— "Gugh."

With all that kinetic energy sent back to Olivia, she let out a small cry and went soaring through the air. It would have been great if that's all there was to it...but by a trick played by a higher will, it reflected off even Olivia's clothes.

Meaning her light clothing became even lighter.

In other words, she was naked.

I mean, at this point, her clothes wouldn't interfere with her movement.

Because, well, there wasn't any yet.

"G-gack...!" She let out a pained cry, skidding to a stop ten paces from me.

And about the same time she realized her own brash appearance, she yipped "Hwah?!" in a voice I'd never heard before, attempting to cover her birthday suit.

With her right arm, her swaying chest. With her left, her secret maidenly garden.



...To me, the sight of my big sister's naked body was nothing to be excited over. However...

"Whoa?! Lady Olivia? Naaaked?!"

"Wh-what an incredible butt...!"

"And boobs! Her boobs are amazing!"

"Plus, there was nothing growing there! It was a split second, but I saw it! She's smooth as a baby!"

"Seriously? I was a faithful believer in Lizer, but...I'm an Olivia fan now!"

For the audience, the scene was out of a dream. The deep howls of mostly corrupt degenerates were enough to shake the earth.

"N-nggh...!" Olivia moaned with her cat ears pulled back.

She was as bright red as a ripened apple, looking down at her bare, jiggly body and trembling.

Th-this was no good. What was going on? This had never happened before. Wh-what in the world would Olivia do now...?! Sweating bullets, I held my breath and waited for her to make the first move.

She suddenly snapped her head up. Her eyes were wet with tears, and I was already put off by that point, but...

"Y-y-y-y-you...c-can't possibly b-b-b-be him...! H-he...he would never! He wouldn't do something this disgusting! Hmph!"

"Hmph!"?! Did the Olivia I know just go "Hmph!"?!

"I-I'll n-n-n-never forget this! Just you wait, idiot! Stupid! Mindless! Imbecile! Drop dead, dummy!" she shouted, spewing childish insults before she burst into tears. Cradling her soft, fair skin, she dashed toward the stadium corridor.

"U-um. Since he broke the rules by using magic, Ard Meteor is disqualified. Could it be he's lost the battle but won the war...?! Against Lady Olivia...?! A-all I can think about is the image of Lady's Olivia's bare body... I... He's seriously a marvel... Incredible... I wish I'd brought a sorcery optical instrument to capture this image..."

Yeah. I felt the same way as the commentator. My head was filled with Olivia. Needless to say, I couldn't care less about her being buck naked. In any case... I suppose it was safe to say her suspicions were gone.

Well, even if that was true, a huge new problem had cropped up. I wasn't any happier.

...Seriously. I swear.

How did things turn out this way?

CHAPTER 34

The Ex–Demon Lord Baffled by His Little Sister

For the second match, I'd lost against Olivia due to foul play.

Afterward, Olivia apparently locked herself away in the staff dorms out of embarrassment, which meant she was disqualified, too...so no one was sure who won.

Thanks to that, the arena became rowdier as everyone eagerly awaited the next match. I watched from the back of the venue and waited for the next pair to be announced. As I did, I saw a shift in the large crystal floating at the center of the arena.

"Well then, our third match is—," the commentator invoked the participants of the next match to show up on the crystal.

Two names.

The first was Ireena. And the other one...

Ginny.

"The daughter of the Heroic Baron and a dark horse! This is a match that's not to be missssssed!"

As the stadium broke into white-hot excitement, I crossed my arms as I waited for the girls to appear.

Finally, the pair exited the corridor and glared at each other from across the large center stage. They exchanged a few words that I couldn't hear because of the uproar, but I was able to read their lips.

"We were interrupted during the Battle Event."

"Let's settle things this time."

They were both brimming with valor.

As for me, I had mixed emotions. They were my pupils...and dear friends. And now they were fighting against each other in a showdown. If possible, I wanted both to win, but I knew that was impossible. With my heart anguished—the match began.

“Hi-aaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Diving right in with gusto, Ireena made the first move. Making a beeline for her opponent, she swung her sword above her head.

In response, Ginny took a defensive stance. “Feh...!”

Lowering her center of gravity, she halted Ireena’s attack. As sparks flew between their clashed blades, Ginny’s eyes narrowed sharply, and she stepped forward with a shove.

“Hah!”

Twisting her body, with the sword gripped tight as she diverted her opponent’s blade, Ginny used the momentum to drive an elbow into Ireena’s face.

“Agh...!” Ireena stumbled forward in agony from the harsh attack.

...At this, I almost leaped out of my seat without thinking.

“Hi-ya!” Ginny began to pursue her, taking advantage of her weakened state.

“Don’t...! Get too cocky!”

A blow, using the force of her entire body. Ireena unleashed her attack in vertical line, violent and bursting with power.

“Tch...!” Ginny instantly switched from offense to defense.

As she stopped the attack with her sword, it sent off a spray of sparks accompanied by a thunderous roar.

Ireena’s physical strength was mighty. It was now Ginny’s turn to be deterred; her face pained. The ground beneath her feet crumbled as fragments flew in all directions.

After that, it was a constant back-and-forth, engaged in combat one-for-one that grew into a close battle. The crowd was on the edge of their seats, their

electrified excitement knowing no bounds.

As everyone, including myself, watched over the outcome of the match, this equilibrium began to come down on itself.

Because slowly but steadily, Ireena began to make headway.

“Ngh...!”

And the difference in ability and strength began to rear its head.

It was unavoidable. Ginny was a succubus, after all. Her forte was attack magic, which was unsuited for enhancing physical ability.

On the other hand, Ireena’s race—the elves—had a high command of all magic, even though they didn’t have a set specialty. Their particular skill was enhancing their physical strength.

This difference between the two races factored into the current tide of the battle. Ginny had slowly fallen into defense, and it was starting to become obvious she was being bombarded. Yet, the fighting spirit in those eyes had not faded in the least.

“You...! You think...! I’d ever stand losing to you?!” She pushed forward forcefully and went to lock swords. As their faces pressed against each other, they brimmed with power.

“I will never lose to you! To someone who tries to steal Ard for herself!”

...Hmm? This is taking a weird turn...

“Don’t you see Ard as a friend? In that case, there shouldn’t be an issue even if Ard is surrounded by girls, myself included! After all, as a friend, it’s none of your business!”

“None of my businesssss?! What the heck is with this harem of yours anyway?! I absolutely won’t accept it! I’m the only one who can stay by his side!” Ireena screamed back, powering up.

The balance that they’d managed to strike between the two swords was coming undone once again.

“Ngh...! What kind of line is that?! You see him as more than friends, huh?!”

Then just come out and say you love him—as man and woman!”

“Sh-shut up, shut up, shut uuuuuup! That doesn’t matter now!”

With her face flushed, Ireena gained command of the duel. Overpowered, Ginny lost her stance under attacks that rained down—but she did not fall.

“Ard belongs to...everyone!”

“Ard is mine!”

They yelled as they dove into another violent rally.

...It was getting to be too embarrassing to watch.

“A catfight over a man! On which side will love prevail?!”

Please don’t encourage them. I’m begging you. To all the spectators watching, stop looking at me. Focus on the match... Ugh, enough of this. I wish they’d hurry up already.

As if the heavens had heard me, it came to an end all of a sudden.

“Agh...?!”

Ireena had gotten her foot caught in a divot on the raging battlefield...and lost her balance.

There was no way Ginny would miss this golden opportunity.

“Ard! We’ll receive you!” Ginny readied her sword and stepped forward.

Her sword plunged down, aiming straight for Ireena’s head.

It was impossible to escape such a direct hit. In that moment, everyone knew the outcome, myself included.

“I won’t!” Ireena yelled, deliberately loosening her stance even further and collapsing to the side. *“I won’t! Give Ard! To anyooone!”*

Her sword went for Ginny’s throat at a close range, and the jab caught her completely off guard. Even in her swing, I could see Ginny was shocked, as she arced her weapon that had lost some of its sharpness—

Their attacks met at the same time.

Ginny’s sword caught the top of Ireena’s head, and Ireena’s was at Ginny’s

throat. As for the victor...

"I...won't lo..." The hoarse voice broke off.

Ginny lost consciousness and collapsed.

On the other hand, Ireena was unharmed. Although she had suffered a major blow to the head, she didn't catch the brunt of it by making herself take that tumble on the battlefield.

Which meant both were collapsed on the stage.

Though visibly shaken, Ireena stood up almost immediately.

Meanwhile, Ginny continued to lay facedown.

"G-Ginny can no longer continue! The winner of this battle is the daughter of the Heroic Baron! Ireena Litz de Olhyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyde!"

Game, set, and match.

At this announcement, Ireena remained dumbfounded for a while as she took a ragged breath. *"I... I did iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit!"*

She bopped up and down, beaming in her charming way.

I felt sorry for Ginny, but deep in my heart, I celebrated Ireena's victory.

"U-ugh..."

Shortly after the final decision had been announced, Ginny regained consciousness, sitting up and frowning—either from neck pain or the frustration of losing. Ireena sullenly held out a hand to her...and helped Ginny back up. Afterward, they both praised each other's valiant efforts with glum expressions.

...I knew they were amazing girls with good personalities. From the depths of my heart, I was proud to be their teacher.

"And now! It's been totally decided who should stay by Ard's side!"

"...What are you talking about? That can't be settled by a sword fight. Are you stupid?"

"...Excuse me?" The veins in Ireena's forehead pulsed. *"And just whooooo are you calling stupid?! You dirty succubuuuuuuuuus!"*

“Dirty? That’s fine by me! At least I’m developed in my mind and not just my body!”

The two started going at it, and the staff tried to break them up, but they were knocked back, and things got out of hand.

...Well, what can you do?

They were spirited, which I thought was a fine thing indeed.

.....

.....

After the third match finished, they wrapped up the four remaining rounds, and the first phase of the Sword King Battle Tournament came to an end. The second phase would begin after a two-hour break.

During this time, the combatants could do as they pleased... I headed out to a restaurant with the remaining victors, Ireena and Sylphy—plus Ginny, who only lost by a slight margin.

“Well, this may be rushing things a bit, but...let us celebrate Ireena’s and Sylphy’s victories. You were amazing out there.”

“Heh-heh! Leave it to me—”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. You won by pure luck.”

“...What?”

“...Hmm?”

Ginny and Ireena shot daggers at each other. I desperately tried to calm them down before I glanced at Sylphy.

I knew it, something weird was going on with her. She wasn’t excited over Ireena’s victory in the least and sipped her water without a word.

There was intense discomfort lurking in my heart.

Then—Sylphy stared back at me and spoke up. “Hey, Ard. I’ll win this tournament, no doubt. Then...when it’s all over, I want you to meet me in front of the Tree of the Sword King. There’s something I want to tell you.”

I couldn't refuse. I felt an intense will in those eyes. I could do nothing more than nod in acceptance.

"...Good luck." Ginny patted my shoulder and gave me a thumbs-up.

"Grrr..." Ireena seemed to be deliberating over what she should do, grinding her teeth. Her eyes kept darting from me to Sylphy.

...Sylphy, is this what I think it means? If it does, I...

.....

.....

After a lunchtime squandered in agony and conflict, the Sword King Battle Tournament proceeded ahead once more—unfolding the second and third phases. The number of participants dwindled with each round.

Then, at last, it was the battle to decide this year's ultimate champion, the final round.

And up against each other: Ireena versus Sylphy.

"If one word could be used to describe this year's tournament, it'd be unexpected. That's all. Starting with Lady Olivia participating in the battle, top picks eliminated in the preliminaries, and the rise of some dark horses, this year's Sword King Battle Tournament is turning out to be one twist after another. And then—there's the roster set to rise up to the final stage! The height of unpredictability!"

As the commentator stoked the crowd's excitement, Ireena and Sylphy looked at each other at center stage, where it seemed Ireena was calling out to her, but Sylphy was unresponsive.

Ireena must have sensed her seriousness. She stopped talking, glaring and pursing her lips at Sylphy with a grave expression. As they remained in silence, time ticked by—

"And now it's time for our biggest, baddest battle! The Sword King Battle Tournament finale! Staaaa—"

Just before the commentator finished with an "—rt " sound, Sylphy had disappeared.

It was her unbelievable way of stepping in—leaping forward with enough speed that even I couldn't follow her with my eyes.

As she was now, Ireena had no chance of catching her—

“Agh...?!” Ireena's neck was struck with heavy force, and she let out a small cry of anguish as she fell backward.

And fainted. Ireena was lying spread-eagle, not even a single finger twitching. Only two words rose to mind: *the end* .

With Sylphy winning the match almost instantaneously, the stadium was enveloped in absolute stillness.

“*Huh...? The match is over...?* ” the commentator, whose role was to fire up the crowd, doubtfully announced.

Which was how the biggest event of the school festival came to an anticlimactic end.

...I crossed my arms as I watched Sylphy look down at Ireena at the center, and I made a promise to myself.

Sylphy. If you're taking things this seriously, then I'll answer in kind.

I'll chose to hurt you.

I won't run away or hide any longer. I'll reveal the truth. And as a result of that

—

Even if you kill me, I'll have no regrets.

CHAPTER 35

The Ex-Demon Lord in Shock

“With this, our school festival has come to an end. From here on out, the time-honored Spirit Festival will begin. In a moment, you will be able to enjoy the dazzling dance of spirits.”

The Sword King Battle Tournament had ended, and throngs of crowds snaked out of the area as this announcement traveled across the school.

“I wonder what sort of program it’ll be this year?”

“There’s no way it can beat the last one. It was amazing.”

Even though the main tournament event had ended, there were still guests mixed in with the students as they collectively looked at the dark canopy above in anticipation. As they awaited the festival’s finale, I headed to the Tree of the Sword King.

To keep my promise with Sylphy.

...I dragged my heavy feet. When I thought about what awaited me, my pace became sluggish. She was probably already waiting.

I was afraid I had to keep her waiting for a while longer.

“...Honestly, why did things turn out this way?” I sighed and glanced up at the sky. It would be all too easy to blame everything on someone else. But...

I did it. I had to take accountability.

“I have no choice but to accept whatever outcome is thrown my way.”

I was anxious and scared as I continued to trudge forward.

My destination grew closer... And then I finally arrived at the Tree of the Sword King.

In the darkness, it stood straight with dignity, looming over me with a certain sacredness. The area around the huge Tree was empty...save for Sylphy, who waited in front of it alone.

To her chest, she held the replica of the Holy Sword, the prize for winning the tournament...the one modeled after Lydia's.

I could feel my chest tighten. At the same time, it made me realize it was time to face what I had coming to me.

...As I maintained this grim resolve, I sensed a presence behind me.

"I wonder why she's carrying the replica of the Holy Sword?"

"It's obviously to get him to praise her victory. Are you seriously asking me that?"

It was Ireena and Ginny. Hidden from view, the two were curious to see what was going on.

"Hey, Ard Meteor. I've been watching you this entire month," Sylphy started with a quiet voice, letting her lips form a gentle grin. "You've always been kind and dependable...and you've cleaned up my messes without a single word of complaint."

She had nothing but praise for me.

"Oh, this is absolutely a confession. There's no doubt of that. I can't wait to see how he'll respond!"

"...I-I'm going to stop her!"

"What? W-wait! Don't get in the way!"

"Let. Me. Go!"

Both Sylphy and I decided to ignore the two messing around in the back.

"Hey, Ard. I—"

By this point, I knew what was going on, even if I was totally helpless when it came to love.

Sylphy was trying to convey her feelings for me.

“Ard, I—”

There’s no way I can allow you to tell me this.

“Sylphy, listen to me.”

I wondered what would happen once I revealed everything.

I knew perfectly well, and it was go time.

But Sylphy cut me off, continuing to speak with the gentlest expression: the last thing I’d ever expected.

“I—I—I can’t help but want to kill you.”

I could not understand this at all. I could do nothing but stand dumbfounded.

On the other hand, Sylphy flashed me a smile of bloodlust and madness— An instant later, the replica of the Holy Sword in her hands began to emit a faint light. Along with it, the Great Tree behind her was releasing a silvery-white aura.

“This is...!”

Its shimmer aroused a feeling of nostalgia somehow...

I felt a throbbing in my chest.

It wasn’t my heart. No... It was Lydia’s soul responding from within me.

“It Is Here That I Shall Proclaim Your Release ,” Sylphy chanted.

At the same time, the replica of the Holy Sword and the Great Tree burst into light particles, emitting an illuminating mass that converged into one colony and gathered before Sylphy.

It became a single giant sword and revealed its true form.

“What...?!” My eyes flung wide open.

My heart beat rapidly, and I was absolutely drenched in sweat.

Thrump.

Thrump.

Thrump.

Moreover, I could feel Lydia's soul calling out. It was the first time she'd reacted in this obvious way. And the cause of it all had to be that thing floating before Sylphy: a silver sword carved with a complex sky-blue design. Simple ornamentation and a rough silhouette.

"The Holy Sword Vald-Galgulus. And formerly the divine, beloved weapon of Lydia the Champion," muttered Sylphy in a cold, inhuman way.

She gripped its hilt. "The true one was sealed within the Tree of the Sword King, and the replica was the key to unlocking it. Now, why would the academy be hiding this? How fascinating. Is it destiny? Maybe. At any rate, I've achieved one of my goals."

That tone was clearly not Sylphy's. It was as though she was possessed... But she radiated a desire to kill, and that was no trick or fraud.

"...Demise-Argis," she commanded, and another Holy Sword was summoned to her empty hand.

The golden blade, Demise-Argis.

The silver sword, Vald-Galgulus.

A Holy Sword in either hand...

It made me think of Lydia the Champion, my former friend.

My chest panged... It could be that Lydia's soul inside me was evoking something with the Holy Swords.

"Sylphy...! You...!"

What are you planning? Before I had the chance to speak, she made her intentions clear.

"Arstella. Glisten, O Soul. Fotoblis. Become My Light... Tenneblick! And Dispel the Darkness!"

With her ancient incantation, the blue pattern carved in the Holy Sword Vald-Galgulus flickered. Then her entire body was wrapped in a silver aura—like a suit of armor—and she stepped forward as those eyes burned and glistened with a savage light.

“Your head will be mine, you know, Ard Meteor.”

CHAPTER 36

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Wheel of Fate

“Thank you for your patience! The Spirit Festival is about to begin!”

Together with this announcement, lights of five different colors glistened against the dark night: red, blue, green, gold, russet. The vivid hues of the spirits moved wildly across the vast sky and brought joy to all who saw them. While back on earth, Sylphy and I were locked in a heated battle.

She approached me, passionate and without any hesitation. A windstorm kicked up from her furious charge, as her red hair went flying all over the place. The space between the both of us grew to zero in an instant— *“Haaaaaaah!”* Sylphy shouted, plunging down her two blades as she released a killer urge.

The slices came at the speed of a tornado and power, thanks to Lydia’s old faithful, Vald-Galgulus. An aura of silver armor cloaked Sylphy, rapidly enhancing her physical abilities and raising the blade’s lethality.

There was one side effect, however.

While using it, the user would be driven to madness.

“Geh-geh-geh-geh! Die! Die—die—die—die—die! Die-ie-ie-ie-ie-ie-ie-ie!” screeched Sylphy, diving into another attack. They were all so easy to read that dodging became simple.

Because of this disadvantage, Lydia had been the only one who had been able to master it. Without her strong spirit and steely convictions, she would have immediately been taken by the madness and dulled by its power.

That said, Sylphy’s prowess in battle posed great danger. Hiding nearby, Ireena and Ginny would likely be drawn into the fight...and as soon as she made any sort of bold move, there was no question the entire academy would be obliterated, leading to some serious casualties.

I cast *Skywalker* and soared high above the earth in an instant.

“*Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!*” she roared, turning on me with bloodshot eyes before casting her own magic to rush toward me.

With the inky sky as our stage, the battle continued, as it showcased the fantastical, colorful dance of the spirits.

Up here, they were a nuisance.

We circled each other freely across the sky...and I searched for the right timing to steal Vald-Galgulus. If I could take it from her, the madness would seep out of her. Then, I’d release Sylphy from the magic possessing her... Whatever was brainwashing her. Unless I did, our conversation wouldn’t get anywhere.

...But even if I returned her to her former self, the end result wouldn’t change. As I twirled about with Sylphy in the darkness, I murmured in irritation.

“Agh, seriously...! Why did things turn out this way...?!”



Streams of colors arced and waved across the vastness of the dark heavens. The fantastical scene created by the spirits who governed the five main elements were the selling point of this Spirit Festival, but...

“At first, I thought it’d be an inferior copy of the performance last year.”

“Wow, a national school always delivers! And it’s not just the five main elements, but the two forbidden ones, too.”

The two forbidden elements were Light and Dark. Both were incredibly powerful, which meant they were difficult to control, so they were banned from general use. The spirits who governed them had wild dispositions. They could not be manipulated by people. Because of that, the spirits who did govern the two forbidden elements, as a rule, were not allowed to be summoned.

“This year turned out to be pretty awesome... Hey, look, the Light and Dark spirits... Are they putting on some kind of show?”

“Seems to me like they’re trying to kill each other.”

“If anything, I’d say it looks like the Light spirit’s pushing down on the Dark

one.”

The public was making a scene with their boisterous chatter.

Before their eyes was a fierce fight that they would never forget for the rest of their lives.

Light and Dark spirits tracing lines of black and white...

Light releasing an enormous beam of energy.

Dark canceling it out with a protective wall and unleashing a crimson heat ray.

Coupled with the dance of the other five main elements, this Spirit Festival was set to go down in history... But the only ones thinking this were the clueless guests and students.

For Ireena and Ginny, who knew the truth of the situation, it made their blood run cold.

“Wh-what’s going on...?!”

“The Tree of the Sword King disappeared and became a sword...and out of nowhere, Miss Sylphy...”

They had no idea how things got this way. But one thing was clear.

The “show” was not the work of Light and Dark spirits, but of Ard and Sylphy.

...The two blankly gazed at the situation for some time.

“Miss Ireena! Miss Ginny!” called a familiar voice.

The pair turned to look at Headmaster Golde.

“Could you please tell me what’s going on?” His expression was calm, but sweat dotted his face.

They openly shared what they had seen and heard, sparing nothing. Taking this in, Golde grimaced. “I can’t believe it...for Miss Sylphy to be a traitor...”

When Ireena heard him murmur this, something in her snapped. “*Sylphy isn’t a traitor!*”

Golde opened his eyes wide, shocked by her anger. It had been an unconscious outburst that surprised even her and left her in a daze. Her face

soon grew dark, and she looked down.

“...I’m sorry. But she’s really not a bad person. There must be some reason.” Ireena clenched her fists tightly. Then, she lifted her head and stared up at the heavens.

This is so frustrating. She needed to let Ard handle Sylphy on his own. She cursed her own powerlessness.

“...Anyway. We’ll leave it to Ard for now. If by a one in a million—no, a one in a *trillion* chance, he can’t resolve the situation...”

When they collectively imagined the worst-case scenario, all three went pale.

“...Let’s all pull something together. I reckon evacuating the guests and students...wouldn’t do much. If she can take on Ard, I’m guessing nowhere in the capital is safe. But we gotta have something...anything...” Golde scampered off somewhere with a grim look.

Ireena felt bitter resentment toward him for assuming they were handling Sylphy as an enemy...

On the other hand, she understood that this judgment wasn’t completely off base. This little-sister type was bringing it upon herself.

Which is why she was pained from the bottom of her heart.

“Ard, I leave her to you. Return her to her original state... But if that isn’t possible...”

If that time came...

“I’ll have to take care of things myself...!”



The royal capital of Dycaeus was once an ancient city with history. Though there had been subtle architectural changes in its cityscape, it held on to those of the distant past in its aesthetics. In particular, there was a large clock tower that had continued to stand tall since the capital’s founding, along with the royal palace, and it stood as a representative example of Dycaesian architecture.

Above the tower’s pinnacle that almost pierced through the heavens, higher

than the clock that carved minute by minute—on the very top of the spear-like tip and looking up at the night sky was one lone figure.

Wrapped in pitch-black garments that melded into the darkness, the silhouette wore a peculiar mask, concealing their face, and spoke in a pleased, androgynous voice.

“Ah, a fine comedy. A girl getting her revenge using the weapon wielded by her former master. The enemy desperate to escape. This is miles better than that boring play at the school festival.”

With a chuckle, the masked figure recalled how they had come to this point.

To Ard Meteor, this current predicament had to be an unexpected surprise. Having said that, he ought to have realized something was amiss.

That’s right... The sixth day of the school festival. On the night that his class was aglow with the victory of the Excellency Award. After Sylphy had gotten up during their meager after-party. The masked figure had appeared before her as she went to do her business.

When they met in the hallway, Sylphy was, of course, overtly suspicious of the mask.

“Why are *you* here...?!”

“Well, I’m what you might call an intruder, but don’t concern yourself with that. There are more important matters in this world. For example...the fact that you have yet to slay the Demon Lord. Compared to that, this is all trivial.”

Sylphy’s shoulders trembled as her trimmed brows set into a frown. “You said Ard Meteor was the reincarnation of the Demon Lord, but I don’t think that’s true at all. He’s nothing like Var, and—”

“Goodness gracious. You really *are* as stupid as ever,” sneered the masked figure in a voice filled with obvious contempt.

Before Sylphy could even respond, the figure moved toward her in an instant, brazenly grabbing her slender face.

“He is the reincarnation of the Demon Lord. This is the irrefutable truth... Well, I guess it’ll never reach the heart of a fool who’s fallen in love with the

enemy. And that's why..."

It was in that instant that the face behind the mask seemed to twist into a smile. At least, that was what it had felt like.

"...I shall force you to dance," declared the figure into Sylphy's ear with cheerful malice.

And then, her world went completely black.

When she came to in the next moment, the scene before her looked different. It made her jump in her skin.

A vast land lying in ruin, destitution, deserted. A stormy sky, thunder clapping, black rain pouring to earth. Its inky drops bounced off the ground, echoing as they burst open— A man was looking down on a woman. He donned an impressive attire of black and red, and his beauty was without parallel in this world, twisting with grief.

There was no mistake he was the Demon Lord Varvatos.

As for the woman lying at his feet, her lovely silver hair was stained with muddy water, and bitter tears streaked down her face, stricken with despair.

To Sylphy, no one was dearer.

Her master. Her big sister... The one who was like a mother to her. The person more important to her than life itself.

Lydia the Champion.

Sylphy watched, horrified as the life slowly faded from her eyes—and as the magic in the Demon Lord's palm became an enormous blood-red torrent that condensed together.

"...Farewell, my friend."

Right after these words of tragic finality fell from his trembling lips, he shot an attack using magic at Lydia without hesitation.

Sylphy's entire vision was covered in a undulating red wave—

And then she was back. In the hallway of the dim school dorm, Sylphy was crying. Tears flowed freely, and she found herself sobbing. Her heart was

brimming with such confusion, she could no longer think.

The mask released the hand from her face, and Sylphy fell backward with a *thud* as all her strength left her. The cloaked silhouette looked down at her and chuckled.

“What I just showed you was the truth, thousands of years ago.

“His Majesty the Demon Lord. His dear friend. Your Savior. He killed her with his very own hands. In other words—”

For Sylphy, there could be no more devastating truth.

“The one you desire no longer exists anywhere. Lydia the Champion has disappeared from this world... She is now only a fabrication being passed down from generation to generation.”

She couldn't understand. She didn't want to. As a deluge of tears flooded her eyes, Sylphy attempted to escape reality. However, the mask would not allow it, grabbing Sylphy's face once again.

“Kill your enemy. Take down the Demon Lord. That is the only way your life will have meaning, Raging Champion.”

She felt the sensation of something else slipping inside her. After that, her sea of consciousness continued on...

It was at that point she became a partially possessed doll.

“All right. With this, our preparations ought to be complete. Well then, return to everyone and have a pleasant time, Sylphy Marheaven.”

“...Yes.”

The sparkle in her eyes was now lost as they turned completely flat. Sylphy nodded and left quietly.

...As all the images of the past replayed in their mind, the masked silhouette looked at the situation at hand. The zigzags of the two continued to draw across the canopy of the night sky. This was the perfect box seat to watch on.

“Ah, what a fine sight. My two performers. Give me the best comedy. I won't guess how the story might progress. That will make it all the more interesting.

Nevertheless...”

On the other side of their mask, a wicked smile played on their lips before the figure spread out both arms, dancing in a spinning circle.

“The ending will not change. The jester will play their part, and this tale will end on a comedic high note. Ah, I look forward to it. Ever, ever so much.”



“Aaaaaaagh! Aaaaaaaaagh!”

Sylphy’s wails continued to ring through the night sky, anguished screams close to madness. She repeated the same simple attacks even now.

Splitting the atmosphere and setting off a shock wave around her, she dashed through the sky, drawing near me and waving her two blades messily like an upset child.

Which obviously made them easy to dodge... If I were back in my heyday. But as I was now, I didn’t have that kind of leeway handling two Holy Swords.

Ngh...! Lydia...! To think your favorite sword was so...!

Her soul was going berserk inside me, and I couldn’t concentrate on the battle—or find the right chance to nab the sword from Sylphy.

For a moment, the option to cast an *Original* spell that I’d made for my exclusive use crossed my mind. There was no question it’d be the most effective choice, but I wavered. Something was holding me back.

These spells called on me to fuse with Lydia: In other words, I’d be tag teaming with Lydia in my fight against Sylphy. And as one who took away Sylphy’s beloved, it would have been...morally wrong to attack her using Lydia—who was now no more than a doll.

That was why I was hesitant and resolved to try to create an opening with my words alone.

“Stop it, Sylphy! For you to use that power—that Holy Sword! This isn’t how to do it! If you continue, you’ll be going back on Lydia’s word—”

“Aaaaaaagh! Don’t you dare! Don’t you dare talk about her! ” Sylphy snapped, volatile, as her cherubic features crinkled up, warping out of place.

As she let bitter tears steam down her face, she spat out at me, as though placing a curse.

“You! You—you—you—you—you!”

And just then...

“You! You killed her! This is all your faaaaaaault!”

...I could feel my own crimes pierce through me.

Which is why, when I should have used her instabilities to create an opportunity for myself, I was taken aback by her proclamation that it exposed my weakness.

“Diiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!”

“Gah...!”

It was but an instant yet a fatal mistake.

I wasn't able to dodge the two blades rushing toward me—

As the shape of an S was carved into my chest that sprayed blood into the inky night.

That was the last thing I saw.

And then I sank into darkness.



Ard Meteor plunged down to the evening townscape below, drawing an arc as he plummeted from the impact of the two Holy Swords.

“He’s dead, dead—dead—dead—dead.”

She could feel the lingering sensation of taking his life from the tips of her fingers all the way down to her toes.

But that didn't mean anything.

“She won't come back anymore. She's nowhere to be found now...”

Her grief could have shredded her heart into pieces and materialized on her face as tears.

“Aaaaugh! Gaaaaaah!” Sylphy howled in beastly sorrow for some time as

loss gave birth to lamentation.

But as time passed, her heartache turned into something else: hatred. Even though she had killed her bitter enemy, this feeling of loathing racked her heart — “...I won’t forgive him,” Sylphy had murmured before she’d realized it and descended onto the main street.

“What...?! Is the spirit of Light coming down...?!”

“Wait a minute... Is it even a spirit at all...?!”

The crowd stirred—which she found abhorrent for no reason whatsoever.

Because while she was this dismal, this tormented, these guys appeared... composed. And why could they have on calm expressions when Lydia wasn’t here? Even though this world was now void of her?

How could every one of them go on living their lives in peace?

...It would have been better for this world to not exist at all.

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s right. A world without her has no reason to exist anymore.”

She was consumed by a senseless grudge, manipulated by the madness that seeped out of Vald-Galgulus and the mental shackles that the masked figure had bound her with.

Sylphy positioned both Holy Swords—which she had once swung to protect people and now intended to slaughter anyone in sight.

“Vel. Stena. May Interlopers Vanish with One Stroke—”

She began an ancient incantation to cast the most formidable attack of Demise-Argis—one that would cost at least ten thousand lives—that she called forward without hesitation.

“And just what do you think you’re doing?!”

Sylphy felt something strike her cheek, and in the next instant, she was shot up into the air.

With its spell interrupted, Demise-Argis couldn’t respond in any way. Sylphy traced an arc through the sky, sailing across the campus. After her body struck

the ground, she rolled and crashed to a halt against a wall of a building.

As she got to her feet, her eyes swept across the scene, trying to locate where the attack had come from.

And who else could it have been?

“...Ireena.”

With her silver hair standing on end in rage as she stood imposingly was...the older sister whom Sylphy had met in this modern age.



Ireena Litz de Olhyde had raced to the center of the mayhem.

With that figure before her, Sylphy placed her head to her hands and spit out a voice of anguish. “*G-gah, ack-gack-gah...*”

It appeared that Sylphy was resisting something, trying to squash it down, but other than that, Ireena couldn’t make out the situation for what it was. At any rate, she had already decided what she had to do.

“You guys! Get out of here! If you don’t want to be killed!” Ireena called out to the nearby crowd.

They either discerned her panic or felt disquieted by Sylphy’s irregular behavior because they made up their minds in a split second and withdrew at breakneck speed. Each maintained at least a fragment of a composed expression, and no one broke out in a panic. After all, they had gone through a demon attack a month before. It seemed the public had grown used to handling crisis situations, which Ireena had happily miscalculated.

But there was one more error on her part.

“*Phew... Hah...* I finally caught up to you...”

“What?! Ginny?! Why are *you* there?! I thought I told you to stay on campus!”

“Yes, yes. I know. But... I’ll have none of that.”

“*What?!*”

“You know, I can engage in a proper fight, too, Miss Ireena... And I refuse to be left behind again after the incident with Elzard.”

Ginny was stubbornly glued to the ground.

“Ugh, fine, you blockhead! But if you die, don’t tell me I didn’t warn you!”

“Not to worry. I can take care of myself.”

The pair sharply exhaled out of their noses. *Hmph.*

Ireena looked at Sylphy.

“Sis... Sister... That’s who she is, but then again, she’s not...,” Sylphy muttered to herself deliriously.

Ireena’s expression was unshakable. “Hey, you! Do you know what you’re even doing?! If I didn’t stop you, you were gonna kill a bunch of people! That—”

“Aaaaaaaaagh! ” shrieked Sylphy, piercing right through Ireena’s heated speech.

Afterward, she lowered her body and charged like a complete animal.

“Gah...!” Ireena had managed to respond to this wild attack somehow.

It would have been...impossible to dodge, she realized.

With this judgment call, Ireena cast one of the newest invocations that she’d learned, *Giga Shield* . A complicated entanglement of geometric patterns snaked around her entire left arm and covered it with a magic circle, which transformed into a giant, golden, translucent shield.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

At the same time, Sylphy swung her Holy Sword, Demise-Argis, which arced as she wound up her shoulder.

Ireena prepared her defense.

They collided—and Sylphy’s inhuman strength sent cracks down the magic shield.

Compared to other magical defenses that invoked a *Wall* , *Giga Shield* had narrow coverage, making it weak. On the other hand, it held an advantage to similar spells in terms of pure defensive power.

That said... A strike from a Holy Sword was a lot to take on, even if it bolstered

superior defensive skill.

“Ngh...!” Ireena let out a small cry, which caught someone’s attention.

“Miss Ireena! ...That’s it! I’m not going easy on you, Miss Sylphy!” Ginny yelled, consumed by wrath, unleashing her own magic on Sylphy.

It was a high-level attack, *Giga Flare* , that hounded her in a spiral of flames.

There was not even the slightest hint of mercy.

Because even Ginny understood that this Sylphy Marheaven could be a threat comparable to Elzard if they weren’t careful. It was why she would give this attack her all.

“Ugh!” Despite Ginny’s best efforts, Sylphy canceled it out with one swing of her sword.

“N-no way...!” Ginny paled. Her legs shook, and her face filled with despair.

“*Raaaaaaaaaah!*” Sylphy brought down Demise-Argis on her, as the succubus girl was petrified in place.

It barreled down on her in a straight line, roaring and surging toward her, as though it was a blade made of wind, ready to mince her entire body...

“Aaaaaah!” Ginny let out a small shriek as she was blown far off and rendered immobile.

“Ginny?!” With eyes open wide, Ireena worried for her safety, which was when...

“*Gah— Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!*” Sylphy charged forward yet again.

She closed in within an instant, her red hair flying wildly as she plunged her Holy Swords.

“Ggh...!” Ireena stopped the blow as it tingled her whole body with explosive shock.

In particular, it hurt her shielded left arm, and the bones in her wrist were pulverized in an instant, shooting up enough pain that would have caused most girls to immediately burst into tears, causing them to lose their will to fight.

But Ireena’s resolve did not falter in the least. She cured her wound with

healing spells and fixed the damage to the shield by flowing magic into it.

“You damn...!”

Using everything in her power to strengthen her right hand with magic, she balled it into a fist and swung a punch in revenge. Spying an opportunity after Sylphy’s attack, Ireena saw right through her overconfident air and crushed her beautiful nose.

“Nygh...?!” Sylphy groaned as blood came spouting out and stumbled forward before retreating.

Her fist in a ball, Ireena moved toward her. “You...! You’re supposed to be the Raging Champion!” she yelled, her face stern as she struck the side of Sylphy’s face.

As it took the hit, the skin and fat on her cheek stretched out with the punch, and her scorching hair billowed in a grand display.

“You were fighting to protect someone all this time! So why?! Why are you doing this?!” she screamed as she continued to punch—landing blows on her face and torso.

Her fist of steel showed no mercy.

“G-ga-aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!” Sylphy yowled, as though giving a war cry, and turned to a counterattack.

Following Ireena’s steps, she showed no hesitation as she jabbed her two blades. It was a mad dance befitting her title of the Raging Champion.

A flurry of slashes rained down on Ireena’s magic shield in a severe, sharp, intense frenzy. It was no ordinary attack.

“Gngh...!” She involuntarily let out a wretched cry.

But Ireena continued to bear her beating, supplying the smashed shield with more magic to repair it, healing the crushed wrist broken under impact as she defended herself. A constant physical torment ran throughout her entire body. An unflagging feeling of unrest had taken up her heart.

However, Ireena didn’t stop fighting.

This girl Sylphy is stronger than me...!

There's no way I can win as I am now.

I already know that...!

She had realized the difference in their power at the Sword King Battle Tournament. It was a miracle that she'd been able to hold up the fight for this long.

But that said...! Clenching her teeth, Irenea threw power into the left arm holding her shield, and...

"I! Cannot! Run! Aaaaway!" she bellowed, pushing out her shield as if to tackle her with it.

Charging in time with the onslaught, she stopped Sylphy's mad dance—as her shield collided with her body and threw her off balance.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!"

With ferocious vigor, Irenea went into a counterattack. They'd switched offensive and defensive positions once again. But it wasn't an offensive stance meant to bring home victory.

Her magic had already run out, which—for a mage—was as good as being riddled with holes. At this rate, she'd be killed by the crazed girl. As she predicted this terrifying end, Irenea refused to back down.

Ard isn't here.

And so...I'll do it in his place.

I'll protect everyone as Ard's substitute...!

To be honest, she was scared. Petrified beyond belief. But if she gave in to fear here...

I'd never, ever be able to stand by Ard's side!

When he'd rescued her from an abduction at the hands of Elzard, she'd witnessed his unbelievable power, which had resulted in a profound loneliness.

There was probably no one in this world equal to Ard Meteor. And that meant that Ard Meteor would live out a solitary existence, no matter where he

happened to go—or how hard he tried to gain affection or deepen friendships.

Without someone to stand alongside him, it was no different than loneliness. That's why Ireena was trying to join his ranks. To save her precious friend from heartache.

That said, this strenuous fight was not for her friend alone.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!" She threw a hard jab into Sylphy's face and drove her back.

Ireena had already gone beyond her limits. But strangely, she wasn't feeling exhausted. On the contrary, she was welling with power.

Ard...! I'll take your place...!

In your stead, I'll stop... No, that's not it.

I'll do it. I'll stop her.

And it won't be in your place, but as Ireena Litz de Olhyde.

By my own power, I will stop Sylphy.

After all, I am...her big sister...!

For Ard. For Sylphy. And for all those she needed to protect.

Ireena's wishes dispelled her fears and complaints as she became mysteriously teeming with power.

This had to be it: the power of courage.

It was at the core of her body in the depths of her heart. Her soul was outpouring with colossal energy. Torn by battle, Ireena rose to action.

"Sylphy! Your power! It's to protect people, right?! You've always acted for others! Sure, you caused trouble! But I understand! You've got a kind heart! You're worthy of your title as the Raging Champion!"

It was as though energy bubbled out of her, propelling her forward. As she rode out on its momentum, Ireena attacked Sylphy in an onslaught. Before she knew it, the shield on her left arm was gone, leaving her now defenseless.

And yet, each of Sylphy's counterstrikes were useless against her.

There was something inside Ireena—something like a shell breaking open. As she underwent this odd sensation, Ireena continued to call out to Sylphy. It had to be from her soul.

“You get serious for other people! That’s why I can’t allow you to hurt others! Because that’ll make them hate you! I can’t stand for you to face that after you’ve fought so hard for us all this time! That would be too heartbreakiiiiiiiiing!”

To protect humanity and Sylphy’s reputation.

That’s what this fight was for.

Ireena threw all her might into her right first to thwack Sylphy’s face.

“Ngh-ah...!” With a small yelp, Sylphy’s head bounced back...and she was flung onto her butt.

Ireena looked down on her as she let out a ragged breath.

“Sis...”

Rife with her wishes, this hit could have reached the depths of her bewildered mind.

Life had returned to Sylphy’s eyes—though it was faint.

It was all over. Ireena had stopped her little sister.

Her heart raced with relief and accomplishment. That could be why she could feel herself getting sapped of her inexplicable surge of energy...and her entire body was racked with extreme exhaustion. She couldn’t help but pitch forward and fall to her knees.

As she did, her line of sight came into Sylphy’s, and they stared at each other.

“Sis... I...” Sylphy had returned to her old self.

Had she not realized what she was doing? She looked perplexed by this entire situation.

First and foremost, Ireena dragged herself closer on her knees to try to hold her dainty body and put her at ease...

“Great improvisation, Miss. From here on out, you’ll be in over your head.”



A blow from the side. Before she could realize it, Ireena was suspended in midair.

The next moment, her body had dug into the side of a wall, and she was vomiting blood.

“Gghh...?!” As it sprayed out of her mouth, she crashed to the ground.

Desperately clinging onto her faltering consciousness, Ireena lifted her head. Through her blurred vision, she could see Sylphy in a state of confusion...and next to her, someone in a mask.

“These ad-libs always bring something new to the table. In that respect, Miss, I cannot help but commend your performance. That said, we’ll have a problem if you don’t go through with the ending in the script,” pressured the masked figure with a weak shrug before looking at Sylphy next.

“My goodness. You can barely be considered a third-rate actor. You can’t even play your given role at the most basic level. My core belief is that there’s no limit to disappointment and despair, but I never thought I’d rediscover them at this age, you piece of trash.”

Spewing abuse, the figure clutched Sylphy’s head with one hand.

“Wh-what...are you...doing...?! St-stop that...!”

Ireena desperately tried to move her body, but even her fingers were reluctant to obey.

As if to mock her, the mask cast some sort of magic, invoking a magic circle that enveloped Sylphy’s head, then— *“Ah-gah...gah-gah-gah-gah!”*

As soon as the circle dissipated, the old Sylphy was once again consumed by madness.

“Come, now. We’re back on course. Let us head to the climax,” the mask mumbled, spinning around and finally melting into the dark of the night...

“Ah-gah-gah-gah. Sister. Sister—Sister—Sister—Sis—Sis—Sis!” With her eyes rolled to the back of her head, Sylphy let out a shrill shriek, both hands holding a Holy Sword at the ready. She had every intention of putting an end to Ireena.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Bitter tears overflowed from her eyes, crying out in grief. Ireena wasn't sobbing over her own inevitable death...but her inability to stop Sylphy and the unhappy ending that awaited her.

Sylphy stepped forward with her two harbingers of death. There was no hope of escaping, avoiding, or defending against them.

Ireena could feel death hounding toward her.

She'd reached her limit.

Ireena's lips opened of their own accord and called his name: “Ard...!”

With a merciless slash, her soft flesh would be sliced in two—

“Quit it, Sylphy!” rang a powerful voice, an enraged shout, and something black masked her vision.

A moment later, the painfully sharp echoes of a collision rang out.

Appearing before Ireena was the immensely powerful Ard Meteor who she had seen at the decisive battle with Elzard.



As I fell into unconsciousness, I could feel something squirming inside me. When I allowed myself to experience it fully, there was a cool, stiff feeling against my cheek.

...It seemed I had landed in a back alley downtown. The streets were empty. I was completely alone.

I pushed through the dull pang in my head, sitting up to examine my chest and torso. My uniform had been shredded in the shape of an X. But otherwise, I didn't have a single scratch on me.

“...Looks like you saved me again, Lydia,” I said, giving my thanks to her soul sleeping inside me.

Ever since a certain incident that caused us to fuse, she automatically healed me whenever I was in a critical condition. That was the only reason I was still alive after Sylphy's lethal attack.

“...Hey, Lydia. Are you going to condemn what I’m about to do?” I called out to the soul within me, but there was no answer, of course.

As I aired some of my mental exhaustion with a heavy sigh, I willed my legs to stand up...and cast an *Original* spell, *Private Kingdom—the Story of a Lonely King*.

It would be unbelievably cruel to go up against Sylphy with Lydia. That said... I couldn’t let her be, and it was too demanding on my current form to oppose her one-on-one.

I would use the ace up my sleeve. As I continued the invocation, my surroundings were covered with innumerable geometric patterns that flashed in and out of existence.

When all was complete, a woman wrapped in a jet-black straitjacket appeared before me.

A shining head of silver hair. Pointed ears. A beauty that could illuminate the night.

As I looked at her...at Lydia, I murmured quietly, “Our little sister is being led astray. Please give me the power to stop her.”

.....

I knew it, no response. It made sense. This was Lydia’s corpse, in other words. While she did appear the same, she had no will of her own. She was a puppet who could do nothing more than obey my orders.

“...Back in the day, you didn’t listen to me at all. Look at you now,” I egged her on, but Lydia didn’t even twitch a brow.

If she was alive, she would have radiated rage as she punched the living daylights out of me.

...But I had just experienced a bunch of firsts with her—including her reaction to the Holy Sword. I had hoped maybe something about her had changed.

...What am I doing? This is no time to be getting all sentimental.

“Lydia. Phase I.”

UNDERSTOOD.

INITIATING PHASE I OF FULL-BODY TRANSFORMATION.

ACTIVATING BRAVE DEMON.

Speaking in a monotone, she drew near me, wrapping her arms around me in an embrace. In the next moment, Lydia burst into inky particles...and became a chain that snaked around my right arm.

At the end of the dark-gray coil was a large sword, the shade of night, resting in my hand. I was about to cast *Search* to find Sylphy's location—but before I could...I felt a surge of magic power.

There was no question it was Sylphy.

No sooner had I realized this than my legs were already in motion.

I had a bad feeling. I had to hurry to location.

With Lydia in the form of a black sword in hand, I tore through the night and raced across the town. In the middle of the main street, I was greeted by... Sylphy's hair billowing wildly as she charged at Ireena.

It was obvious that Ireena was wounded. She couldn't dodge or defend. If she took one hit from Sylphy's Holy Swords in her state...!

"Quit it, Sylphy!" I shouted in irritation, kicking off from the ground at full speed.

It was by a hair's breadth, a close call, but I somehow made it in time. Forcing myself between Ireena and Sylphy, I readied my black sword and took the blows, as the sharp clangs of metal against metal rang out at alarming speed. The shock of each attack jolted my blood, my muscles, my organs, my bones.

"Are you all right...Ireena...?!"

"Y-yes!"

"I see. I'm glad to hear—"

I was about to finish speaking to Ireena in her immobile state when Sylphy's eyes shot open, and her mouth twisted into a snarl.

"*Demon Lord! Demon Lord—Demon Lord—Demon Looord!* " she chant-

howled, in hatred and in murder and in resentment emitting off her entire body. “Haaaaaaaah!”

With a strange voice, Sylphy drew her swords, and I jumped sideways to put distance between her and Ireena. *This way, there won't be any more added danger to her*, I determined. I dodged her fierce attacks and warded them off with my dark sword...

“Give it up, Sylphy! At this rate—”

“Gaaaargh! Diiiie!” She wasn't listening at all.

...This was, without a doubt, the effect of some sort of magic. I assumed she was under a brainwashing spell. In that case, magic to release this would probably do the trick...hopefully.

But the problem was that I'd been casting a range of those invocations for a while now to no avail.

In this situation, my options were to summon either a super-ancient noble treasure older than time itself, a sort of votive to the gods...or I could use an *Original* invocation.

...And both would result in the worst outcome.

Whether I chose one or the other, it wouldn't bring Sylphy back.

In the beginning, I thought I could just rip her away from that Holy Sword. But that didn't mean she would return to her original self. She would continue to attack me with magic and cause unspeakable damage to our surroundings—forever.

Meaning the only way to resolve the situation was...to kill her.

Just like the time I had killed Lydia with my own two hands.

“Gaaaaaaagh!”

“Ngh...! S-Sylphy...!”

I could tell she was returning to the usual pace of her swordplay.

Was she starting to grow accustomed to the madness, or was the brainwashing losing its hold on her?

At this rate, she would eventually stop striking me with her predictable blows, moving onto magic and other huge moves.

If that happened...most everyone in the capital would fall victim.

To prevent that, I had no choice but to stop her myself.

“...Hey, Sylphy. You’ve always been an idiot, but you were never bad,” I said as I dodged her strikes. It was my way of hardening my own heart. “No... I’ve never seen a soldier as kind as you. You caused all sorts of trouble and pissed me off countless times...But you know, I...”

I gritted my teeth as I endured the tragedy of it all.

“Sylphy. The Raging Champion. I don’t want for you to become a mass murderer. I want you to remain...as a renowned soldier, as a hero whose name is carved in legends...in the hearts of people for all eternity.”

And that’s why...I’ll kill you.

“Gwaaaargh!” A heavy swing down. A vertical flash of light.

I lightly jumped to the side in time with it. Her wild swings would inevitably create an opportunity. The other Holy Swords drew back to crush that opening, but...from my point of view, it was fatally slow.

I went to pierce her neck. There was no question I would strike first.

And then her head would drop to the ground.

...There was no other way. To protect her honor, I could do nothing else.

It appeared the moments before the direct hit stretched out into eternity.

My black sword advanced. And it propelled forward cruelly slow.

Everything proceeded with certainty.

...Five seconds until contact. Four. Three. Two. One—

Zero.

The tip of my sword reached her pale, delicate neck. At this rate, with a little bit of force, it would all be over.

It was what I had to do.

“You’re going to kill? Again?”

Whose voice could that be? As soon as it rang inside my head, the fingers gripping my sword unconsciously weakened.

As a result, the tip pointed at Sylphy’s neck halted at the topmost layer of soft skin— A moment later, the swords sliced me in a reverse diagonal cut in near perfect harmony.

Demise-Argis. Vald-Galgulus. Did they resent the one who killed their former master?

But now...they could rejoice. It seemed this was as far as I would go. I could convince myself as much as I wanted, but I still couldn’t kill Sylphy. I couldn’t kill someone who was like family to me.

“Aaaaaard!” Ireena cried out, echoing in all its sorrow, as blood sprayed into the air before my eyes.

On the other side of that, Sylphy was on the verge of dealing the finishing blow.

“Please...Sylphy... Let my life...be enough to atone...”

Praying these words reached her, I let my eyes close.

There were no grudges. I couldn’t possibly bear it. Since reuniting with Sylphy, I’d always been prepared for this moment. She had every right to kill me, and it had been my duty to accept her hatred. That was why I bore no hard feelings.

However... I had regret over those I would be leaving behind.

Ireena, Ginny, Olivia...and the many friends that I’d made in this era. I wondered if they’d be able to live peacefully.

...To Olivia especially, I wanted to offer my apologies. I couldn’t reveal the truth to her, even at the very end.

I’ll be waiting for you in hell. When we meet again, I’ll accept a full serving of your punishment—as many times as it takes.

Ah, Sylphy would behead me any second now.

This life wasn’t so bad... Even my past—

STOP...IT...SYL...PHY...

In the moment of stillness just before I was about to meet death, I could make out a hoarse voice melting into the hush. It came from my black sword. There was no doubt it was Lydia's voice.

"S-Sis...?" Sylphy froze. The Holy Swords coming for my jugular came to a halt.

"*Syyylphyyyyyyy!*" bellowed a voice, teeming with life and power, from afar.

When I gazed in that direction, I saw Ireena sprinting toward us furiously... with Ginny sitting on the ground not far behind her. Despite her own severe wounds that left her unable to stand, she must have mustered her strength to heal Ireena.

"I leave...the rest to you...Miss Ireena..."

Ireena ran swiftly as Ginny's voice feebly called out to her.

"*Get a grip and wake up, you dummmmy!*" she screamed in Ireena-like fashion, bunching up her right fist—and throwing a punch at Sylphy's cheek to deliver a full-body blow.

"Gweh!" With a small cry of anguish, her entire body bounced back, soaring through the air, until her petite body came crashing down...and the Holy Swords spilled from both hands. All the madness emanating from her was now gone.

"Lydia... That miracle was yours, wasn't it...?" I posed to the black sword, but there was no answer.

At any rate, things were finally over... Or so it seemed.

"Goodness gracious. To be this useless. I would say it's almost novel."

Just as a voice was born from the darkness, in the next moment, someone manifested next to Sylphy, who was still in a collapsed heap on the ground. It was difficult to tell at a glance if this person who bubbled up out of the night was a man or woman. The figure was of average height for a man but tall for a woman and had black hair, the same color as our surroundings. A slim body was covered by some kind of tailcoat...and a face hidden by an odd mask. This unknown person briskly approached Sylphy and picked up the fallen Holy Swords.

“You were originally supposed to end Ard Meteor. What happened to that? He’s still in good health, and you’re lying down on the ground. Ah, pathetic, wouldn’t you say? You dog.” The masked figure kicked Sylphy in the stomach.

“U...gh... Sis...,” she muttered incoherently, on the verge of fainting.

Laughing scornfully, the mask stepped on her head. “It’s always Sis this and Sis that. You’re still a child. That’s why you can’t get your vengeance, you scrawny mutt. You finally went all out. You only had one more swing left! The Raging Champion? Don’t make me laugh. You’re just a little bed-wetting brat.” The figure scraped and dragged her head into the ground with their shoe.

I couldn’t watch in silence any longer.

“...Get away from her, peon.”

The mask looked right at me. “Okay, I will. But she’s the one that’s moving.”

With a cackle, the figure sent her flying with another kick to the stomach. Sylphy landed a few merel away, groaning.

This time, I wasn’t the only one burning with rage. Ireena was with me, too.

“...Stand back, Ireena. I’ll use your rage and strike it into that ruffian. You just watch from where you are.”

“...I understand. I don’t want to get in your way, Ard.”

Ireena was not foolish enough to rush in with indignant fury alone. She was not so weak that she did not see the difference in power.

“Make sure you get them good for me,” she added, resigned to her role.

I gave her a confident nod and looked at the mask. I couldn’t read the expression behind it, but...I could tell it concealed a smile.

“Heh. Fired up, huh. The son of the Great Heroes. I ought to warn you in advance that you’ll be sent to the depths of hell before you can strike me with your rage. Yes, by the hand of these two Holy Swords,” the figure proclaimed, spinning around, tone assured of victory.

“Ard Meteor, you were the target this time. As you know, we’re out to revive our masters. The fastest route is abducting the Lady Ireena. If we offer her as a

living sacrifice at the ceremony, one of our masters will undoubtedly be resurrected. But...”

“There are annoying pests that need to be taken care of, is that it?”

“Aye, yes. Once you’re no longer a concern, abducting the Lady Irenea will be easy. That’s why...I’ve been using your little friend here, but she didn’t work out as I’d hoped. She’s too useless to accomplish anything. And now I have to intervene.”

“...You’re making it sound as if you’ve already won.”

“Haven’t I? Isn’t that the truth? You’ve been injured by a small fry of a Champion. And you’ve burned through at least some of your energy. I would not dream of rivaling you in perfect health, but as you are now, as long as I have the Holy Swords...the conclusion is as plain as day.” Chuckling, the mask readied the two weapons. “Well, then. Come and let us begin. Do you have any last words? I’ll make this quick, and—”

I cut them off.

I was at my limit, in more ways than one.

“Looks like you underestimated me.” I gave a sigh of lament—and stepped forward.

I closed in on my opponent in merely an instant. There was no chance for the other side to react to my movements. I sniffed derisively.

“(Demon) Lord knows, do you think I would be weakened from fatigue?” Gripping my sword tightly, I swung diagonally downward.

“Aaaaaaaaagh?!”

It was here the mask finally showed some response, shouting in shock and bounding backward in an attempt to evade, but...

They were half a second too late.

The sword drew another arc, and its night-colored blade caught the mask’s torso and left a diagonal cut.

“Ngh...!” Fresh blood sprayed out as the mask leaped backward to put

distance between us before readying Vald-Galgulus.

“Arstella. Glisten, O Soul. Fo—”

The figure started a super-ancient incantation.

“Too late.”

To attempt an incantation right to my face, when my mind wasn’t stunned with shock, was like saying “Go ahead and attack me.”

Which is exactly what I decided to do.

I powerfully stepped forward once again and immediately closed the distance — “That sword isn’t a good fit for you.”

Wouldn’t you agree, Lydia? I called upon her in the form of my black sword, swinging down and slicing the masked person’s right arm clean off. Vald-Galgulus fell to the ground along with it and rang with a sharp clatter.

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeek!” they shrieked in unease, leaping to the skies and casting flight magic without even healing his severed right arm. They rose up high and then came to a standstill.

“This capital! I’m gonna blast it all away!” they proclaimed, spewing rage and snatching Demise-Argis before beginning an incantation.

“Vel. Stena. May Interlopers Vanish with One Stroke—”

In the middle of it all, Demise-Argis was covered in a dazzling sparkle—as an electric shock ran through the golden blade and attacked the mask.

“Ggggggggggggggh?!” The mask was in unspeakable agony. It was so hard to bear that Demise-Argis fell from their grip and lodged in the ground before me.

I held its hilt tightly. “A Holy Sword chooses its master. And it appears Demise-Argis did not choose you.”

What a jester.

No, jesters make people happy.

This person is...just unpleasant.

“Observe well. This is how you wield a Holy Sword.”

I yanked it out from the earth and readied it toward the mask, who was immobile from their lingering torment, and began the incantation.

“Vel. May Interlopers ,” I spat, as though pouring out all the rage for my enemy swirling inside me.

“Stena. Vanish with One Stroke.”

I was the one you wanted... How dare you hurt Sylphy.

And that was enough to make one deserve death.

The fool was always causing trouble and always unpleasant—someone who I constantly tried to run away from. Sylphy was my hopeless little sister, and I couldn’t hate her for it.

And you dared hurt her, kick her, disparage her. Your life has no value for me to take. And yet...

“Olvidius. Of My Blade.”

When the final piece was invoked, Demise-Argis illuminated in a blinding light, and I swung the Holy Sword at the enemy looking down on us from above—as though to slice the floating figure clean in half.

And all at once, a shimmering torrent blasted out of the golden blade, racing through the sky like a roaring river, and— “N-no way! This can’t be haaaaappening!” screeched the mask, disappearing into the night sky. All that remained was darkness. That inept figure was nowhere to be found.

...It seemed to be all over. This opponent was a real joke. Which was why...I felt that something was off.

I’d beaten the same type of foe in my old world, more times than I could count. But for some reason, it felt weird to categorize this mask as one. I toyed with this uneasy feeling.

“S-Sis... I...,” Sylphy mumbled and moaned as she remained collapsed nearby.

...And now that it was all over, there was still something I had to do.

I would officially reveal my true identity, detailing how I stole Lydia away from her...

I will let her do as she pleased to me. If that meant dying, so be it. I was ready. I would never think to ask her for forgiveness.

My face was tight from nerves as I picked up Vald-Galgulus from the ground. If Sylphy told me to die...I wanted it to be by Lydia's own weapon. That was why I brought it to her.

I approached Sylphy, about to call out.

Thrum , throbbed Lydia's soul, responding to the Holy Sword.

YOU...IDI...OT.

A raspy, spasmodic voice once again called out from the black sword.

"Lydia...?!" My eyes widened in shock as something no short of a miracle appeared before my eyes.

Though I hadn't given any orders, the black sword burst into particles—moving toward Sylphy and reverting to her doll form.

"Sis...?!"

It was Lydia, bound in dark chains. She had no awareness, but this doll who only listened to my orders was now moving of her own accord once again.

YOU...FOOL...

She fell to one knee, peering at Sylphy's face before yanking the bonds on her right arm off and poking Sylphy's head.

YOU IDIOT... YOU HAVEN'T...CHANGED...AT ALL.

"Sis...! I—I...! I...!" She couldn't stop stammering, her words welling up inside her.

As she struggled to find them, she could only sob at this reunion with her beloved.

Lydia stroked her cheek and gently smiled.

HEY, SYL...PHY... THIS WORLD...ISN'T...SO BAD , Lydia continued as if she were admonishing her child.

LIVE LIFE...TO THE FULLEST. IF YOU...GO ON...WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH...

THEN...

Lydia returned to her old self, showing us the face that she'd always had on, a smile as bright as the sun.

WE'LL MEET AGAIN, SYLPHY.

...The miracle ended here. Lydia dispersed into black particles.

"If that's what you want...I...," Sylphy murmured before appearing to let go of her consciousness that she'd barely managed to string together. She closed her eyes and drifted off into sleep, breathing deeply.

Ireena and Ginny approached her nervously to check on her condition. Looking out on this scene, I placed my hand on my chest. "'Idiot,' huh? It's been a while since you called me that."

Were you trying to stop me? Hey, Lydia. Have you...forgiven me?

...No, that's not right. You never resented me from the start.

You called me an idiot because I still haven't forgiven myself.

"'Live life to the fullest,' huh."

Of course, that had been directed at Sylphy. But...I could interpret those words as I pleased. Wasn't that my choice?

"Lydia...you're as unfair as always. We're nothing alike. You save others as if it were nothing."

I had tried to be forgiven by allowing Sylphy to kill me.



I was trying to forgive myself.

But...that wasn't the answer. Wasn't that what Lydia was trying to tell me?

It might be selfish, but I chose to see it that way.

If I obeyed and lived as best I could, then maybe...

"...Maybe I'll get to see you again, too, Lydia."

CHAPTER 37

The Ex-Demon Lord and a New Beginning

The Sylphy incident was attributed to the demons. Or rather, Ireena and I used our connections to sweep it under the rug. If we hadn't, Sylphy would have been made into a villain. To prevent that, we told everyone that she was the victim in the scenario... It was too soon to say if this story would take hold.

On an entirely different note, the Holy Sword Vald-Galgulus was sealed in a way that was virtually the same as before. It was too dangerous. It granted unimaginable power, but on the flip side, it came at a high cost. I had no intention of allowing anyone to wield it ever again.

...But there was always that rare possibility. Taking this into account, I added in a little of my own handiwork...though I hoped it wouldn't come to that.

Now, back to the present.

The school festival had come to an end a few days ago, but its jovial mood lingered over the students who had taken to creating a boisterous racket after school.

Amid all that, I was walking back to the dorm with Ireena, Ginny...and Sylphy in tow.

"U-um, guys... I've really caused you a lot of trouble. Again. Please allow me to apologize," Sylphy began, saying something almost admirable, which was incredibly, extraordinarily unusual.

Ireena and Ginny were gaping at her as one might a rare animal. Meanwhile, Sylphy's eyes were glued on me.

"About that... To be honest, I don't remember what happened at all. My consciousness was hazy...but I do remember attacking you."

That had been the work of the enemy's magic and a side effect of wielding

Vald-Galgulus. Meaning the knowledge that I was the Demon Lord had been completely wiped from her memory.

...In other words, regarding Sylphy *alone*, she only knew what was convenient for me.

“Not to worry. It’s all over now.”

“I’m still sorry. I wasn’t myself. I had it in my head you were the Demon Lord and tried to kill you.”

“...And if that was true?”

“Huh?” Sylphy stared at me with a blank look.

...I was definitely asking something I shouldn’t. It wasn’t a question to just throw out there. I ought to enjoy the peace and leave the past where it was.

Yet, even as I understood that, I couldn’t help but ask: “If I was the reincarnation of the Demon Lord...would you kill me? Would you...hate the Demon Lord?”

Sylphy thought for a while. This extended silence brought back my good old stomach pain...and I was sweating involuntarily.

Her answer finally came. “...To be honest, I’d hate you. I want to kill him, and that isn’t something that would go away easily.”

“I—I see.”

It was the most obvious of answers. I should have known that without having it confirmed. What was I doing? Did I want her to forgive me? How stupid. There was no way—

“But you know, I would want to kill him, but I wouldn’t. I’d hate him, but...someday I’ll let that go. After all, my sister Lydie definitely wouldn’t want me to hold a grudge.”

My eyes widened in surprise. Before me, Sylphy clutched both hands tightly to her chest.

“Even though he killed her, I don’t think she hated him... I think she was saying the people left behind shouldn’t hate him, either. And...that if I didn’t

listen to her, she'll give me a beating in the next world. That's what I think she meant."

As if reminiscing about Lydia, Sylphy began to well up with tears. She took a breath and shook her head, then looked straight at me.

"Even if you were the reincarnation of the Demon Lord, I wouldn't do anything. I wouldn't even ask about the past. You know, she said all the time that life will be foolish if you keep hold of each and every resentment... I want to become like her. I want to live like her. And..." Sylphy broke out into a soft, tearful smile.

"The next time I see her, I want us to laugh from the bottom of our hearts. That's why I don't hold a grudge against him."

I couldn't say anything. All words escaped me, leaving me with feelings even I couldn't understand.

She chuckled. "Anyway! I'm gonna enjoy my life as a student to the max! I'm looking forward to our *extracurricular activities*, Sis!"

"Agreed! No work, all play!"

"...Um, don't forget about me. Oh, so you're just gonna ignore me? I see. I don't particularly mind, I'll have you know."

Ireena and Sylphy squealed happily. Ginny glared at them.

I couldn't help but break into a smile.

Life as students with Sylphy. It was a future I was actually looking forw—

BOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

...looking forward to, I was about to say.

But before I could finish my thought, a part of the school building exploded and crumbled.

"Aaaaaaaaaaah!"

"What?! What was that?!"

As angry bellows and terrified shrieks surrounded us, I *naturally* looked at Sylphy. "...What did you do?"

“Wh-what’s that look for?! Not everything is my fault!”

“...You’re telling me you have nothing to do with this?”

“Nope! It’s proof someone set off my trap!”

“...Trap? There was a trap in the academy?”

“Exaaactly! It’s always hard to tell friend from foe! Which is why I set traps in all sorts of shady places! Hee-hee! Seems we’ve got one already! Serves them right!”

I guessed it was to protect Ireena and our classmates, but it was just plain annoying. It didn’t matter how you looked at it.

And who was caught in her mischievous behavior this time?

“Gaaah! Syyyyyphyyyy! Where are you, you idiioooooiot?!”

Our big sister, Olivia vel Vine.

A howl fueled with rage filled the whole school as her disheveled figure came roaring toward us as if she’d used detection magic. “Damn yooooou! You’ve got some nerve setting a trap in my secret potato field at school! This is the last straw! Get ready, ’cause I’m gonna slice you up goood!”

“Aaaaaaaaargh?! ”

A dangerous game of tag began between a Heavenly King and the Raging Champion. Watching the two fly into a clamorous uproar, I sighed as I had a thought. *I changed my mind. Could this girl please go somewhere else?*

After the dust settled, and as I carried Sylphy on my back since she’d fainted with fear, Ireena, Ginny, and I made it to the front of the dorms. I was willing to bet these busy days were to continue from here on. Honestly, it was annoying as hell.

I smiled dryly to myself at this.

“Um, Ard. Might I have a moment?” Ginny had called out to me. “There is something that has been bothering me... Would you mind if I ask you something?”

“Not at all. If I can help you, then by all means.”

“...It’s about the night you stopped Miss Sylphy.”

There was no doubt about the subject of her question.

“Miss Sylphy was speaking with that illusion... A Champion, right? What in the world was that about?”

I had been tossed into a hefty trial—something I obviously needed to handle.

“...Ard, could you be the Demon Lord?”

AFTERWORD

It's been two months since we last met. Myojin Katou here.

Unless...there are people who started with the second volume?

If that's the case, I recommend you go back and read the first one.

It's summertime, which can only mean one thing: horror movies.

When asked for a recommendation, how do you answer?

When it comes to the more famous ones, you might choose: *Friday the 13th*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, or *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. Or maybe something more obscure, like *Fungicide*. I'm sure everyone will break into a cold sweat just thinking about the staff and cast who made it.

Well, my personal top recommendation is a little different.

It's called *Kamen Rider Amazons*! This is a remake of *Kamen Rider Amazon*, a uniquely gory title with a CGI hero who delivers a truly terrifying experience. On top of that, it has that real *Kamen Rider* passion, so it has it all even if you're just looking for simple entertainment.

...This may sound like an ad, but I'd love for it to have more of a following. That's all.

And last but not least, that leaves me with my words of gratitude.

First, a word to my editor. I apologize for causing you trouble when the sweltering heat left me delirious from stress. Next time, I promise I won't be stingy on my electricity bill and will turn on the air conditioner.

Next is Sao Mizuno, who has provided stunning illustrations since the first volume. I'm grateful to you for taking the time to create more illustrations for this volume on the extremely tight schedule. Thank you so much.

And then finally...to you, the readers who placed this book in your hands, I cannot thank you enough. I pray we will meet again in the third volume. Until

then, I bid you farewell.

Myojin Katou

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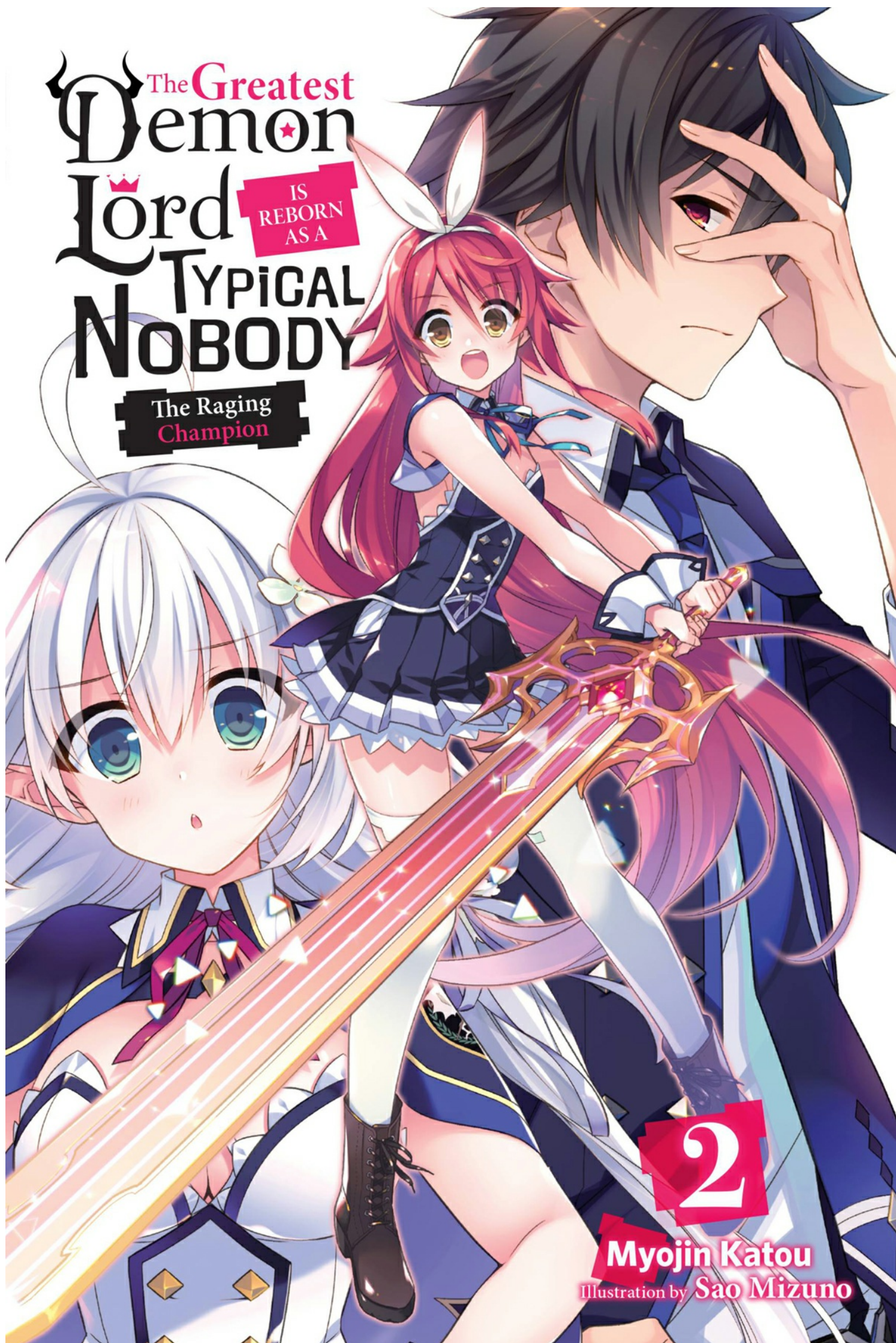
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